THE FUGITIVE, an action story of two men, hunter and hunted

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TEXAS RANGERS

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

FEATURING: **TORNADO TRAIL** By JACKSON COLE

A Texas twister wreaks havoc in this unusual Hatfield novel

Reducing Specialist Says: **LOSE WEIGHT** Where It Shows Most **REDUCE** MOST ANY PART OF THE BODY WITH

ELECTRIC Spot Reducer

Spot Reducer

Relaxing • Soothing Penetrating Massage

UNDERWRITERS LABORATORY APPROVED

FOR GREATEST BENEFIT IN REDUCING by massage use spot REDUCER with or without electricity—Also used as an aid in the relief of pains for which massage is indicated.

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LIKE magic wand, the "Spot Reducer" obeys your every wish. Most any part of your body, where it is loose and flabby, wherever you have extra weight and inches, the "Spot Reducer" can aid you in acquiring a youthful, slender and graceful figure. The beauty of this scientifically designed Reducer is that the method is so simple and easy, the results quick sure and harmless. No exercise or strict diets. No steambaths, drugs or laxatives.

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by Practicing at Home in Spare Time

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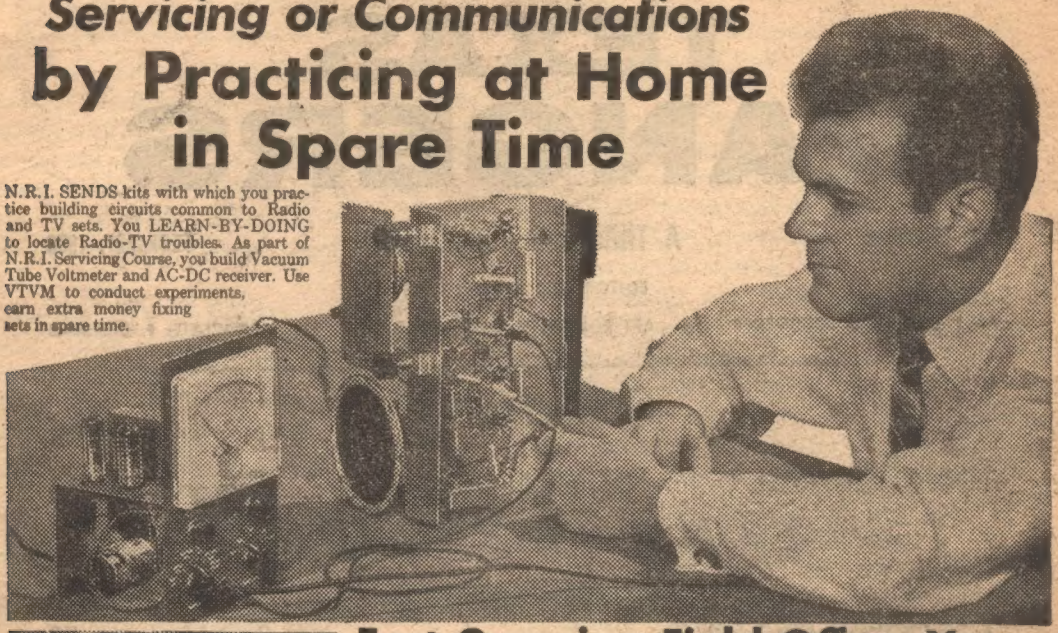

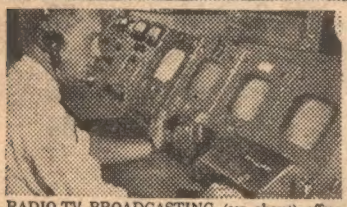

RADIO-TV BROADCASTING (see above) offers important positions as Operators and Technicians. RADIO-TV SERVICING Technicians (see below) needed in every community. Their services are respected, their skill appreciated.

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TEXAS RANGERS

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MAYBE YOUSE DON'T TALK LIKE THIS, BUT-

—are you *sure* you don't make other, less glaring mistakes in English which can cause people to misjudge your true ability and educational background?

So many people do have "pet mistakes" in English of which they are completely unaware. For example, some use such expressions as "Leave them lay there" and "Mary was invited as well as myself." Still others say "between you and I" instead of "between you and me." It is astonishing how often "who" is used for "whom", and how frequently we hear such glaring mispronunciations as "for MID able," "ave NOO," and "in-com-PARE able." Few know whether to spell certain words with one or two "c's" or "m's" or "r's" or with "ie" or "ei," and when to use commas in order to make their meaning absolutely clear. Most persons use only common words—colorless, flat, ordinary. Their speech and their letters are lifeless, monotonous, humdrum.

Why Most People Make Mistakes

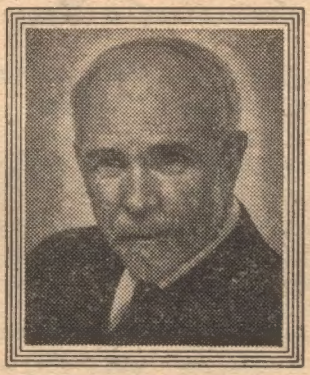
What is the reason so many of us are deficient in the use of English and find our careers stunted in consequence? Why is it some cannot spell correctly and others cannot punctuate? Why do so many find themselves at a loss for words to express their meaning adequately? The reason for the deficiency is clear. Sherwin Cody discovered it in scientific tests, which he gave thousands of times. *Most persons do not write and speak good English simply because they never formed the habit of doing so.*

What Cody Did at Gary

The formation of any habit comes only from constant practice. Shakespeare, you may be sure, never studied rules. No one who writes and speaks correctly thinks of *rules* when he is doing so.

Here is our mother-tongue, a language that has built up our civilization, and without which we would all still be muttering savages! Yet some schools, by wrong methods, have made it a study to be avoided—the hardest of tasks instead of the most fascinating of games! For years it has been a crying disgrace.

In that point lies the real difference between Sherwin Cody and these schools! Here is an illustration: Some time ago Mr. Cody was invited by the author of the famous Gary System of Education to teach English to all



SHERWIN CODY

upper-grade pupils in Gary, Indiana. By means of unique practice exercises, *Mr. Cody secured more improvement in these pupils in five weeks than previously had been obtaind by similar pupils in two years under old methods.* There was no guesswork about these results. They were proved by scientific comparisons. Amazing as this improvement was, more interesting still was the fact that the children were "wild" about the study. It was like playing a game!

The basic principle of Mr. Cody's method is habit-forming. Anyone can learn to write and speak correctly by constantly using the correct forms. But how is one to know in each case what is correct? Mr. Cody solves this problem in a simple, unique, sensible way.

100% Self-Correcting Device

Supose he himself were standing forever at your elbow. Every time you mispronounced or misspelled a word, every time you violated correct grammatical usage, every time you used the wrong word to express what you meant, suppose you could hear him whisper: "That is wrong, it should be thus and so." In a short time you would habitually use the correct form and the right words in speaking and writing.

If you continued to make the same mistakes over and over again, each time patiently he would tell you what was right. He would, as it were, be an everlasting mentor beside you — a mentor who would not laugh at you, but who would, on the contrary, support and help you. The 100% Self-Correcting Device does exactly this. It is Mr. Cody's silent voice behind you, ready to speak out whenever you commit an error. It finds your mistakes and concentrates on them. You do not need to study anything you already know. There are no rules to memorize.

Only 15 Minutes a Day

When the study of English is made so simple it becomes clear that progress can be made in a very short time. *No more than fifteen minutes a day is required.* Fifteen minutes, not of study, but of fascinating practice! Students of Mr. Cody's method do their work in any spare moment they can snatch. They do it riding to work, or at home. They take fifteen minutes from time usually spent in profitless reading or amusement. The results are phenomenal.

Free—Book on English

It is impossible in this brief review, to give more than a suggestion of the range of subjects covered by Mr. Cody's method and of what his practice exercises consist. But those who are interested can find a detailed description in a fascinating little book called "How You Can Master Good English in 15 Minutes a Day." This book is published by the Sherwin Cody Course in English in Port Washington, N. Y. It can be had by anyone, free, upon request. There is no obligation involved in writing for it. The book is more than a prospectus. Unquestionably it tells one of the most interesting stories about education in English ever written.

If you are interested in learning more in detail of what Sherwin Cody's method can do for you, send for the book, "How You Can Master Good English in 15 Minutes a Day."

Merely mail the coupon, a letter or postal card for it now. (No agent will call.) *SHERWIN CODY COURSE IN ENGLISH, 2672 Central Drive, Port Washington, N. Y.*

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FRONTIER POST

By CAPTAIN STARR

Measure of a Man

PROBABLY a no more riotous community ever existed in the West, or anywhere else for that matter, than the Virginia City of 1866. Even though the vigilantes had originated in that Nevada town, blazing weapons still settled most differences.

Gun duels were of such common occurrence as to cause little or no comment. But one day a young man known to history only as Johnny roused considerable talk.

Johnny wore two guns, not unusual at that time. He also was the quiet sort, with the decorum of a man confident of himself. But there was something about him, noticeable even in his clean clothing and alert eyes, that suggested to the local barflies that he was a good man to leave alone. So as far as Virginia City was concerned, Johnny had the run of the town, and no one got in his way.

He looked like a gunman—which was good enough for the cowboys and miners who thronged the streets and saloons. They gave him ample elbow room.

In his inspection of the town, Johnny discovered one place which particularly appealed to him. Called the Brass Rail, it was a cool, shadowy oasis in summer, and a warm hideout in winter, and so was particularly popular with others as well.

Johnny soon became a steady patron. He was asked no questions, and volunteered no information. He simply enjoyed the coolness, and drank alone.

He was in the Brass Rail one night when a new entertainer appeared, to sing lusty ballads for the sweaty miners and lean, sunburned cowhands. Johnny admired her so much that he made some inquiries about her. Her name, he learned, was Julie Niles—or Miles. It didn't matter which. He just liked the girl, so he headed for her promptly and asked her to join him at his table.

"Look, stranger," she said, as she looked him over, "I reckon you don't know it, but everybody else knows I'm Rod Peel's girl." She saw no recognition of the name on the young man's face, although Peel was a gunman whose rep was notorious in at least four Western states.

"Ma'am," Johnny said to her, "if you'll set with me, I'll take a chance on anything that happens because of it."

Julie liked his confidence. She liked him. And she not only sat with him that night but frequently on other nights when she finished singing. His courtesy appealed to her—something entirely new in the life she had chosen, and she especially appreciated it. He didn't make the usual passes, seemed entirely different from most men she continually encountered. He was always clean and apparently was widely traveled and moderately well-educated.

So the two came to be recognized as a steady couple—and the trade in the Brass Rail boomed. Hard-bitten miners and cowhands alike were keenly interested in seeing what would happen when Rod Peel came back after his long absence. No one ever mentioned aloud the reason for that absence.

The night that the renegade did come

(Continued on page 8)

"I call it a bad day if I don't make $25 before noon"

(This chair alone brought $4.50 with twenty-five minutes work and 32¢ in cleaning materials.)

by Harold Holmes

"Just a few months ago I made the big move. I gave up my job and started spending all my time in the little business I had been running on the side. It wasn't an easy decision, but, now I'm tickled to death I made it. Not just because I'm my own boss or because I have an excellent chance of making over $10,000 this year. It goes deeper than that.

"You see, this idea has caught on like wildfire in my town. Not a day goes by without my phone ringing with women calling for appointments. The beauty of it is that once a woman becomes my customer, she calls back year after year. Not only that, she tells her friends, too, and they call me. Before I know it I'm swamped with work. (And at $7.50 an hour net profit it doesn't take long before my bank account is really mushrooming.)

"Funny thing, but back last year, before I started, I never realized the money there was in this business waiting for someone to come along and collect it. Just think: every house in town has furniture and most have rugs or carpeting. I concentrate on just the better homes and have more work than I can handle. You know why? Because women are fussy about their furnishings. Can't stand to see them dirty. That's why they call me over every year.

"The average job is worth $25.00 to me and takes a little over 2 hours. Out of this, after paying for materials, advertising and other expenses I net about $15.00 clear profit. This means I need just 3 jobs a day to clear $11,250.00 in a year. Frankly, since this will be my first full-time year I'll be glad to hit the $10,000 mark. But after that this business should grow larger each year until I have to hire men to help me handle the business.

Personally Trained by Another Dealer

"Believe me there's nothing magic about it. I didn't know a thing about cleaning and mothproofing before I became a Duraclean dealer. But after my application was accepted I was trained right here in town by a successful dealer from another city. I was astonished by the short time it took me to become an expert. Actually, much of the credit must go to the Duraclean process, which is so safe it has earned the Parents' Magazine Seal.

"The portable machine you see is just one of the electrical machines I use. It manufactures a light aerated foam with a peculiar action chemists call 'peptizing'. It means that instead of being scrubbed deep into the fabric, dirt is gently ABSORBED by the foam, leaving the fabric clean all the way down. Women can't believe their eyes when they see how it works. Colors appear bright again, and rug pile unmats and rises like new. I don't have to soak rugs or upholstery to get them clean, which ends the problem of shrinkage, and means the furnishings can be used again the very same day. This alone has brought me a lot of customers.

"As a Duraclean dealer I make money with two other services, too: **Duraproof** . . . which makes furnishings immune to moth and carpet beetle damage (it's backed by a six year warranty) and **Durashield**, a brand new dirt-delaying treatment. It coats fabrics with an invisible film that keeps dirt out. On jobs where I perform all three services, I make a triple profit!

"One of the nicest things about being a Duraclean dealer is that every month I get help from Duraclean Headquarters. My services are nationally-advertised in famous magazines like McCall's, House Beautiful and many others. I also get a complete advertising kit prepared by experts. (There's even a musical commercial!) I get a monthly magazine full of methods to build business and I can meet with other dealers at Duraclean conventions. I'm also backed by insurance. In fact there are over 25 regular services I get under their unique System.

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"Maybe you too would like to break away from your job and make a fresh start in a business of your own. Do you need a shop? Certainly not. I operate from home. Need a lot of money to start? Not at all. Duraclean finances reliable men, after a moderate down payment, and furnishes enough supplies to return your TOTAL investment.

"You get everything you need: equipment, supplies, advertising matter, personal training, and regular help from Headquarters. To get all the details, fill out the coupon. There's no obligation and you can decide for yourself. I'll say one thing: if you DO become a Duraclean dealer, you'll be glad the rest of your life that you took time today to write."

Irl H. Marshall, Jr., International Headquarters

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Desk 8-692, 839 Waukegan Avenue, Deerfield, Ill.

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City_____ State_____

(Continued from page 6)

back, the crowded saloon became as still as a tomb when he entered. Men casually strolled away from any proximity to the table where Julie and Johnny sat, to do their drinking elsewhere. Johnny gave no indication of having noticed.

Peel watched the couple for several silent moments, then sauntered to their table, swiveled a chair from another table, swung it around and dropped into it, his ice-cold eyes fastened on Johnny. There was a hard little smile at the edges of Peel's mouth. Neither of the three spoke a word, but Peel's very silence was a definite challenge. And at last he stared them down.

Johnny arose, nodded to Julie and walked out of the barroom. Derisive laughter followed him down the plank walk—the lash of strong men being applied to the shoulders of a coward. For of all the sins of the Old West—and they were many—cowardice alone was unforgivable.

THE next day Virginia City settled back into its routine, and the Brass Rail was doing a comfortable mid-day business when the louvred doors swung inward and Johnny stood in the opening. His clothing was as neat as always, but his face was unshaven and haggard. It was apparent that he had fought a tough battle of some kind with himself.

Without singling out anyone in particular, he said: "I'd be obliged if you would pass the word to Peel that I'll be at Lynch's Saloon around four this afternoon."

The respect for him that had been shattered was hastily resurrected, and Johnny once more was in the good graces of the hangers-on in the Brass Rail. His message, too, was quickly carried to Peel, each man now eager to see the showdown.

About an hour before the appointed time for his meeting with Peel at Lynch's Saloon, Johnny went to a barber shop and relaxed while he was shaved, cleaned up and had his hair combed. He chatted with the barber, but little was said by the watching customers when Johnny finally paid up and left. But the barber, wild-eyed and anxious, hurriedly shoed everybody out, locked the shop and lit out up the street.

Johnny walked slowly toward the saloon for his rendezvous. Peel watched his approach as he lounged against an overhang post. When the two were no more than twenty feet apart, Peel straightened lazily and nodded to Johnny.

"That's far enough, stranger. Better make your draw."

And then came the surprise for the watching men who filled the street at a safe distance. For when Johnny reached for his gun, his move was unpracticed, even awkward!

Peel's first slug tore into Johnny's body high, and to one side. He went off-balance and swung crazily sideward. Peel's second slug blew his heart to pieces. Johnny went down in a welter of blood just as the barber came loping up, panting and wringing his hands.

Then other watchers were crowding up close. Someone muttered: "Gawd! He went for them guns like he'd never touched 'em before!"

The barber was sweating. "That's what I was running up here to tell you hombres! While I was shaving him he told me he'd never killed a man, or even drawed them guns in his life!"

Peel looked at the barber blankly. "What in hell did he get shaved for, if he knew he wasn't going nowhere?"

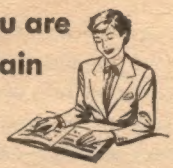
"He said he wanted Julie to remember him looking nice, when he'd be lying in his box. All neat and clean and fresh shaved."

Peel walked away.

He never went near Julie again, and shortly she, too, disappeared from Virginia City. The only one of that unhappy trio who remained there, who is there today, is the unknown kid they called Johnny—the gunman who never fired a gun.

Learning to Play Music is Now Easy as A B C

A. First you are TOLD in plain English WHAT to do



B. Then a picture SHOWS you HOW

C. Then you PLAY it yourself -- and amaze your FAMILY and FRIENDS!

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SO many people deprive themselves of the pleasure of playing their favorite musical instrument—because they have the idea that learning music requires special "talent" and long hours of practicing scales and exercises. But that's not true any more—and it's a pity more people don't realize it. Our modern way to learn makes it EASY AS A-B-C.

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GHOST TOWN

By CURTIS HEATH

The old ones told a foolish tale
Of lights around the tumbled jail,
Of shrieks and laughter from the Star
And faces lined along the bar;
Drunken faces that were glowing,
Bellowing a drunken tune.
Don't ride there when the wind is blowing;
Don't ride there when there is a moon.

Sometimes, at night, I ride that way.
The street is just a short defile
Through buildings long turned weather-gray.
The short cut saves a good half mile.
The board walk is a scattered ruin
Where tumbleweed and sage are growing.
I'd never seen it in a moon,
Or when the wind was blowing.

Last night the wind was black and dusty
Where it brushed against the moon,
And fumbled at the shattered, rusty
Hinges of the Star Saloon.
The shrieks were more than just the blowing
Of the wind through empty stables,
And the lights were not the glowing
Of the moon across the tables.
Don't ride there when the wind is blowing;
Don't ride there when there is a moon!

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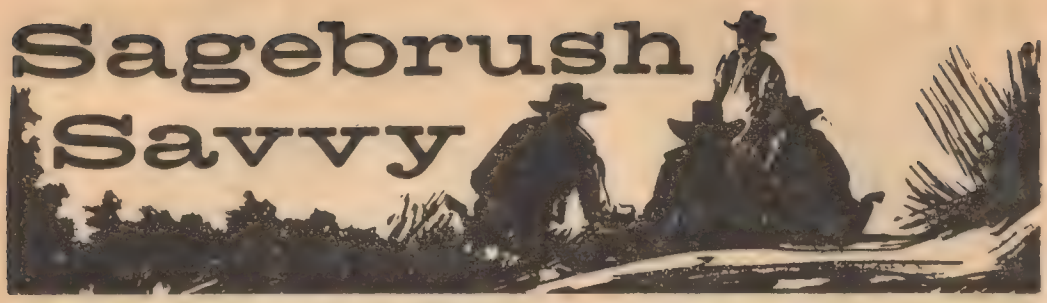

A Quiz Corral Where a Westerner Answers Readers' Questions About the West

Q.—Do rattlesnakes use their poison fangs in eating a rabbit, or do they fold them back out of the way while swallowing?—R.D. (Ohio)

A.—There has been some disagreement about this, but slow motion pictures taken by George Straecke some years ago at the University of Arizona show rattlers sinking their fangs into a rabbit while in process of swallowing, not both fangs together, but by advancing one ahead of the other as the rabbit moves slowly down the snake's throat. Of course snakes do not chew food but swallow it whole, whatever it is. Each time the fang is thus used it doubtless injects venom into the rabbit as long as there is any left in the poison sacs, but its own poison has no harmful effect on the rattlesnake's digestion. The U. of Arizona experiments also show that it takes a big rattler about an hour and a half to swallow a grown rabbit, head first.

Q.—Do you have to speak Spanish to get along on a trip into Mexico?—W.H.T. (Minn.)

A.—No, but learning a few words as you go along makes it more fun.

Q.—Are there any jaguars in the United States?—T.H.D. (N.J.)

A.—An occasional *tigre* (TEE-gray) or jaguar has been killed near the Mexican Border in Texas, New Mexico and Arizona, but they have been "strays" that wandered up out of Mexico, as the big spotted cats are not indigenous to any part of the U.S.

Q.—Where is the best Western locality to prospect for uranium?—R. A. P. (Ky.)

A.—If I knew for sure, I might go there myself! Heavy deposits of uranium have been and still are being found in a wide area around where Utah, Colorado, New Mexico and Arizona corner together. This is wild, desert country and a prospector needs to be well equipped and well informed of the difficulties in order to prospect it safely and with any hope of success.

Q.—Just what is the honda on a cowboy's rope?—A.E.T. (Pa.)

A.—*Honda* is Spanish for slingshot or parbuckle. Spanish pronunciation is OWN-dah, but common Western usage is HAHN-dah. It is a knotted, spliced or braided-in eyelet at the business end of a lariat through which the catch loop is slipped. The best hondas are spliced or braided in with strands of the rope itself and lined with leather. Metal linings, such as brass, are sometimes used, but are not in favor with most working cowboys.

Q.—I read about floods on the Trinity River in Texas. How did it get such a religious sounding name?—D.E. (Wis.)

A.—Early Spanish explorers were usually devout Catholics and often gave religious names to their discoveries. One of the most common was "La Santa Trinidad," which means "The Holy Trinity," from which came the translation "Trinity." There is a town called Trinidad on the Trinity River, in proof of its Spanish origin, though I can't give you any date or the name of the explorer who named this river.

—S. Omar Barker

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Tornado Trail

a Jim Hatfield Novel **By Jackson Cole**

Boiling out of the brush and sand-scoured wastes of the Big Bend, a Texas twister blows the lid off the Lone Wolf's fight with a bandit gang

CHAPTER I

Manhunt's End

A TEXAS sandstorm of violent intensity was building up beyond the far horizon, a storm that might very well defeat the greatest manhunt in Big Bend history. Ominous dust clouds filtered the glare of the sinking sun, seeming to flatten it into a red, bloodshot eye.

That sinister red light was in the eyes of the Texas Ranger as he crawled, flat as a whiptail lizard, to the rimrock overlooking the prehistoric Indian *rancheria* at Rincon Seep.

Six riders were watering their mounts and pack horses at the waterhole, down be-

Covering the outlaw chief from behind, Hatfield ordered in a soft but deadly voice, "Answer him, Zero! Pretend all is well!"

low the cave which centuries-dead aborigines had used as a cliff dwelling. Seeing them, Jim Hatfield knew his desperate gamble had paid off. He had overtaken the escaping bandit gang a day short of the Mexican Border. The coming storm could not cover Todd Zero's getaway now.

There was no doubt in Ranger Hatfield's mind that these dust-grimed men on the jaded, hoof-sore horses were the same owlhoot gang which had fired the railroad trestle six days ago, up in Pecos County, to halt the west-bound California Flyer.

They had dynamited the express car and vanished in the direction of Mexico, cutting across the west Texas badlands. Their loot was the most fabulous in the annals of Texas outlawry: half a million in newly-printed U.S. currency, consigned to banking institutions out in California.

Within an hour after the train robbery, the greatest manhunt in borderland history was under way. A telegram had reached Jim Hatfield of the Texas Rangers at Fort Stockton, where he was training a platoon of Ranger candidates, ordering him to join in the hunt for Todd Zero. He had done so, taking with him a kid named Chuck Callis who had been assigned to Hatfield for training.

Now, six days later, Jim Hatfield was within easy sixgun range of his target, but the odds were too great to attempt a mass capture of Zero's gang. Six to one. The rookie, Callis, holding their horses down in the ravine behind him, didn't count.

Through the long years that Todd Zero had been building up his grim reputation as the leader of Texas outlawry, he had always worked with a gang of five. No one knew if they were the same five, however, for they were invariably masked. They struck without warning, in widely-separated spots on the map of Texas: cowtown banks, Wells Fargo stages, railway express cars, freight wagons.

Now, looking down from the rimrock, Jim Hatfield's view was obscured by intervening cottonwoods and sycamores and tamarisks which choked the Rincon Seep's amphitheater. But there was no mistaking Todd Zero, the big rawboned hombre whose black and white gun-harness and unique gold-plated Colt .45 revolvers had a special connotation for all Texas Rangers.

Twelve years ago, when Jim Hatfield had been a rookie Ranger himself, he had seen those gilded six-shooters presented to the "grand old man" of the Frontier Battalion of Rangers, Sergeant Gillespie of El Paso, on the occasion of Gillespie's retirement from active duty.

As if it were yesterday, Hatfield remembered how the distinguished Governor of Texas had handed those presentation Colts to Gillespie, as symbols of what the old lawman had done for the Lone Star State.

He would never forget the acceptance speech old Gillespie had made. Gunshot wounds, rather than advancing years, had forced Gillespie's retirement from active duty. Gunshot wounds inflicted by a former Confederate Army deserter, Todd Zero, who had ambitions to ramrod the contraband traffic along the Rio Grande.

Gillespie, accepting the presentation Colts at a barbecue on his ranch in Uvalde County, had told the gathered Rangers and Texas dignitaries that Todd Zero, driven to take refuge in Old Mexico, had vowed to meet the Old Sarge again and, as Zero had put it, "finish the job I bungled when my slug hit your leg instead of your liver."

Two weeks later, Gillespie was found murdered on his own range, his presentation Colts missing from their pegs over the mantle of his ranch house—and branded deep in the wood of that mantle shelf an enigmatical oval which in following years had become known as the brand of the outlaw, Todd Zero.

And here, magnified by Jim Hatfield's army field glasses, was Todd Zero, ostentatiously wearing old Sergeant Gillespie's Colts. Trailing a pack horse loaded with booty Zero's gang had taken from the blasted express car of the California Flyer six days back. Treasure guarded by six gunhawks, and Jim Hatfield's only help

was Chuck Callis, the rookie apprentice Ranger who was holding their horses down at the foot of the ridge behind him. And Chuck Callis was worse than no help at all.

Hatfield squinted through the binoculars until his green-black eyes watered with strain. He could hear the voices of Zero's men conversing down there, amplified by the natural sounding board of the rocky amphitheater, but the rustling of leaves distorted the human voices beyond possible understanding. The same foliage likewise concealed the rider's identities.

Through open spaces in the sycamore and live oak foliage, which screened off his view of the waterhole below, Jim Hatfield could get a good view of one detail, anyway: the tooled leather cantle pouches which one of the pack horses was carrying.

The Ranger was almost positive that those *alforjas* contained the half million dollars' worth of currency which Zero's raiders had lifted from the smoking wreckage of the railroad car last week. Ten of the twelve soldiers assigned to guard the shipment for the government had been mangled beyond recognition, but one of them had lived long enough to identify Todd Zero, at least, as the unmasked leader of the gang.

Hatfield had no idea how many posses were combing the wilds of West Texas, hoping to cut Zero's sign. He and the rookie traveling with him had aimed for this ancient Indian *rancheria* site only because Hatfield knew of the waterhole here—and it was very possible that it was known to owlhoot riders also.

Zero dominated the tableau below. He was gesticulating and talking earnestly with his men, first pointing at the mouth of the big Indian cave fifty feet above the Seep, then on down the trail which snaked in and out of the Rincon's amphitheater.

THE words "Wagon Gap" were recognizable in Zero's speech. Wagon Gap—famous for its city jail made from granite tombstones salvaged from a bankrupt quarry and monument works in the vicinity—was a cowtown and trading center. It was off the beaten path, built on the western shore of a dry lake and not more than ten miles away from this very spot.

Wagon Gap was the last settlement this side of the Rio Grande boundary between the United States and Mexico, and the border was still a day's ride away—or more, if the standstorm proved to be as violent as Hatfield predicted it would be.

JIM HATFIELD

They're trying to decide whether to hole up here where they can wait out the storm in comfort, Hatfield thought, making a mental guess concerning the debate in progress down at the waterhole.

Or they're deciding whether to use the storm as a cover for their getaway.

Hatfield wriggled his way back from the Rincon cliff brink and peered down the brushy slope behind him to where young Chuck Callis was waiting with Hatfield's big sorrel stallion, Goldy, and Callis's saddler, a copper-bottomed dun.

Chuck Callis was a green brush-country cowhand of seventeen, from Encinal. A glory-hunter, he had enrolled as a candidate for a Texas Ranger's career at the training center in Pecos County. Two weeks out of every year, regular Rangers were assigned to the training barracks, and each had a protégé assigned to him.

Unfortunately, Jim Hatfield had "drawn a blank." Chuck Callis would never make a Ranger. Physically, he was a fine specimen, six feet two and still growing. He had a fair amount of book knowledge, and was above average for his age and limited experience when it came to horse savvy and skill with a rope.

But while Callis could control a bucking bronc or draw a true bead at a running target, or out-slug most men in a fist fight, he had not learned how to control his own ego. An overbearing personality and self-centered temperament had filled his training service record with a string of insubordination demerits. As Jim Hatfield had repeatedly pointed out to the young buckaroo, a man couldn't expect to lead other men until he had learned how to lead himself.

Hatfield groaned as he saw Callis down there, his full attention absorbed with rolling and lighting a cigarette. Twenty minutes ago, when Hatfield had left Callis to scramble up this slope to scout the Rincon waterhole, he had left strict orders for the kid to watch the skyline closely, never letting his eyes stray for an instant, lest Hatfield need him quickly. And ever since they had entered this drought-parched brush country, the Ranger had laid down a rule both of them had to follow: no smoking. The danger of starting a brush fire was too great.

Callis was taking his first puff from the brown-paper cigarette when he caught sight of Jim Hatfield waving at him up the slope. The raw recruit started guiltily and pinched out his cigarette, trying to hide it; but a heavy cloud of blue tobacco smoke hung motionless in the sweltered air between him and the Ranger.

Hatfield was beckoning the rookie to join him.

"Want me to fetch a saddle gun, Jim?" Callis called in a low voice. In this quiet, even a whisper could carry far.

Hatfield made frantic motions for Callis to keep silent, gesturing toward the Rincon and holding up six fingers.

"Wow," Callis commented, starting up the brushy slope. "He must have flushed the game. Looks like I'm startin' my Ranger career with a bang, tangling with the Zero gang."

Callis was agile as a monkey. In a matter of moments he was dragging himself up onto the roof-steep sprawl of rubble alongside Jim Hatfield, just below the rim.

"Zero's outfit is watering up at the Rincon Seep, like I thought they might," Hatfield whispered. "We're fools for luck, but now our problem is just beginning. We've found 'em, but how can we go about bagging our game?"

Callis, instead of being flattered at having a veteran like Hatfield ask his advice, turned scornful.

"Hell, we got 'em in a crossfire, why not shoot the whole damn lot? The rewards are payable on dead meat, aren't they?"

Hatfield waited until he got his anger well under control before he answered Callis.

"If you aim to become a Texas Ranger," he said quietly, "you won't talk like a blood-hungry bounty hunter. Sure, we could probably murder all six of them from up here, but that would make us as low a breed of snakes as they are, or worse, because we represent the law. I want to arrest them alive, if possible."

Callis's lip lifted in a sneer, but his expression changed abruptly as he crawled nearer the rim, wanting his first look at the outlaws grouped around the waterhole below.

"'Sta *bueno*, what would *you* do, Jim?" the rookie candidate asked sullenly. "You're the boss here," he added grudgingly.

Hatfield said, "With this storm brewing up, maybe a full-fledged cyclone from the looks of it, I think Zero may camp here for the night. If they do, I'm going to send you over the dry lake to Wagon Gap to fetch back a sheriff's posse to throw a cordon around this Rincon. Then—"

"Why me?" demanded Chuck Callis. "What if that storm did break? A man can get lost, or even killed in one of them tornadoes."

Anger still lingered in the stiffness of Hatfield's lips. He said patiently, "I doubt if the storm will break before tomorrow, and it may miss us entirely. Hunker down, now, and have your look."

Callis muttered something about being a damned errand boy while Hatfield tried to grab all the glory, but the Ranger made no reply. How Callis had ever gained admittance to the Ranger training program was beyond him. Maybe Callis could make a good impression at Ranger headquarters; out in the field, where a slip of the tongue or a puff of forbidden tobacco smoke could mean life or death, he didn't pan out color, that much Hatfield was finding out.

A MOMENT later the two of them—the Ranger known throughout Texas as the "Lone Wolf" because of the many assignments he had handled single-handed, and Callis, the poorest excuse for a Ranger prospect Hatfield had yet run across—pulled their way to the point where they could see the riders clustered around the seep.

Chuck Callis's boisterous, arrogant manner vanished as the young brushpopper got his first look at real gun-toting bad men. Hatfield saw the kid from Encinal flatten down, hunching his shoulders as if he wanted to burrow into the ground, anything to keep from being spotted by those cold-eyed killers down there.

Todd Zero was spurring his big black stallion up a game trail toward the largest of the caves Hatfield had studied. It was significant to the Ranger that Zero was trailing the pack pony carrying the California Flyer loot, and that the other five riders were remaining behind. Two of them, Mexicans by the look of the serapes slung over their shoulders, were busy unloading the grubsacks and canteens from the other pack animal.

"Looks like Zero's going to camp in that cave," Hatfield whispered. "He's the one trailing the packhorse."

Callis's eyes widened like goose-eggs as he got his good long look at the man who was probably the most dangerous killer Texas had known in twenty years.

Hatfield and the rookie saw Zero dismount and start unsaddling, up on the ledge of rock at the mouth of the cave. The five bandits in Zero's cavalcade, however, were forming a single-file heading toward the canyon which would lead them out of the Rincon.

"Remember, now," Todd Zero's voice came distinctly to the two men lying on the cliff overhead, "you ain't going to town to drink and gamble, you're going for fresh horses and to stock up on grub. And likewise, you've got that storm threatening, and I figure it's going to be a ring-tailed heller when it hits. Alvarez, you savvy the orders?"

A Mexican voice answered Zero: "*Si*. We will be back by one o'clock tomorrow morning with new horses all around."

Todd Zero, with a final wave to his men, turned and led his horse out of sight into the cave. The pack pony carrying the men's bedrolls, and the saddlebags Hatfield believed to be stuffed with stolen currency, remained ground-hitched outside.

Dust rose in stifling clouds as Alvarez and his four henchmen spurred their tired horses into a lope and vanished down the exit canyon.

Hatfield nudged young Callis with his elbow and wriggled back away from the rimrock. It would be fatal to their plans

if the eagle-eyed Todd Zero spotted them on the Rincon's brink.

"You get the picture, don't you?" whispered Hatfield. "Zero knows his horses are too dead beat to buck that sandstorm. His men can show themselves in Wagon Gap without being recognized as *malo* hombres. They'll buy or steal fresh ponies and try to beat the storm back to Rincon Seep. It's an ideal spot to rest up in."

Callis's eyes flashed. "And Todd Zero, the one with the biggest bounty on his topknot, is remaining behind to guard the loot. That means we're two against one, safe odds. We got Zero trapped in that cave besides. Jim, you and me are goin' to be famous—"

The Lone Wolf cut in wearily, "You'll be dead, if you don't shut up and listen to me. Look, Chuck, those *buscadors* don't know this country like I do. They've got a long, rocky trail to follow before they reach town. But if you cut across Dry Lake, you'll beat them to Wagon Gap by a good hour."

Chuck Callis's face fell. "You're still sending me to town?" he asked. "So *you'll* get the glory of putting a slug in Todd Zero?"

Controlling himself with an effort, Jim Hatfield said, "You can have all the glory, son. But Rangers have to work together, like a team. My job is to dab my loop on Todd Zero while his men are away, and recover that government money. Yours is to help lay a trap to capture all five of Zero's gang. Are you game?"

Intrigued, Callis said in a mollified tone, "How can I trap five customers as tough as Zero's amigos are supposed to be?"

"I want you to rattle your hocks over to Wagon Gap," Jim Hatfield explained, "and look up the sheriff. His name is Mel Benson. Tell him you're my right-hand man. Tell him to round up a four or five man posse and cut back here to Rincon Seep."

"To help you tie a can to Zero's tail?" said Chuck Callis. "Hell, I can go down there and smoke him out of that tunnel myself, without any need of a sheriff's pos—"

"We'll have a trap all set here, to spring on Zero's gang when they get back from town," Hatfield cut in as if he hadn't been interrupted. "I'm counting on you, Chuck, to follow my orders to the letter. Do you understand, now?"

Excitement made a vein start pulsing on Callis's throat.

"I savvy," he admitted, "but it seems to me it would be simpler to knock off Zero's riders as they arrive at Wagon Gap. Let me spring the trap in town, instead of out here."

Time was wasting. Hatfield said sharply, "I don't make a habit of explaining the reasons for my orders, Chuck, but I'll make an exception in your case because you're new to the game.

"Zero's five men may show up in town singly, or in a bunch—there's no way to know. It'll be after dark, and the chances are good you couldn't recognize 'em even if you ran into 'em face to face, what with all the cowpunchers drifting into Wagon Gap on a Saturday night, from outlying ranches.

"So," Hatfield continued, "if you carry out orders, we'll be waiting here with a posse when Zero's men get back tomorrow morning. We'll make a clean sweep of the whole bunch, dead or alive. But if you bungle things down in Wagon Gap, the whole gang could slip out of your fingers like a covey of quail."

Callis nodded grudgingly. "*'Sta bueno*, Jim. You're the boss, so I'll play the cards the way you've dealt 'em, I reckon. Wish I had a Ranger badge to show the sheriff, though."

Hatfield grinned. "It'll be a big step toward winning that Ranger badge, kid, if you carry out my orders tonight. Otherwise," he warned bluntly, "I'm going to have to recommend you for dismissal, Chuck. So far on this jaunt, you haven't shown the qualities Texas needs in a Ranger."

Callis reached out to grip Hatfield's hand. "I'll be back before midnight," he promised, "with the sheriff and his men at my back. You can depend on me, Jim."

A few minutes later the Lone Star Ranger saw his rookie *compañero* riding off down the ravine which led toward the alkali-crusted dry lake, across which the lights of Wagon Gap were just beginning to twinkle in the dusk.

With any luck at all, Callis should be at Sheriff Benson's office a good hour before Zero's riders hit town. In the meantime, Jim Hatfield had his own work cut out for him: the capture of Todd Zero himself, and the recovery of the loot.

It wouldn't be an easy arrest, the Lone Wolf admitted to himself. Zero had often sworn he would never be taken alive. Creeping up on the outlaw, on a night which seemed to be holding its breath in anticipation of the approaching storm, might make surprise impossible of accomplishment.

Hatfield wriggled back to his lookout post on the rim, his mind filled with active misgivings about Callis's trustworthiness. An odor of smoke reached his nostrils; he saw the faint flicker of firelight inside the cave where Todd Zero was camped.

When darkness came, Jim Hatfield would go over the cliff by means of a lariat and force his showdown with the outlaw. The way the storm clouds were blotting out the sunset glow, darkness wouldn't be very long in coming.

CHAPTER II

Try for Glory

ONCE out of the twisted creases of the Rincon uplands, Chuck Callis lost his dread of the cyclone clouds to westward. They were a long way off, maybe two hundred miles. Between him and the pulsing lights of Wagon Gap town was a white floor, level as a coffin lid, which had once been a lake, later a quicksand marsh, and now a quick short-cut to the settlement.

The boy's sullen resentment of authority, born and bred in him from earliest childhood, had been close to open rebellion against Jim Hatfield today. The belief that the Lone Wolf Ranger was giving him the dull routine side of this adventure tonight still smouldered in Callis as he reined up to let his horse rest before setting off across the dry lake. His hands went unconsciously to the sack of Durham in his shirt pocket; in a few moments he was twisting himself a quirly, his full attention on the mission awaiting him when he arrived at that cowtown, ten miles across the flats.

It was not until he was fishing a match from the snakeskin band of his Stetson, cocking his thumbnail to strike the flame, that he came back to his senses. A lighted match could be seen for miles. It might even draw a bullet. Hastily, Chuck Callis discarded his unlighted smoke, flipping it into the dark.

Across the distance, as a gust of wind blew in from the north, Chuck's ears picked up the muted drumroll of horse's hoofs. Zero's riders, folowing the old established trail that skirted Dry Lake, avoiding its numerous quicksand *sumideros* of centuries back—*sumideros* which no longer existed.

Chuck had a pretty fair mental picture of this country in his head, thanks to what Jim Hatfield had told him earlier today, when they had picked up the sign of eight horses following the ancient Indian trace toward Mexico.

As early as three o'clock this afternoon, the Lone Wolf had told Callis what he believed Todd Zero would do:

"It's a dry land, kid, and Zero's men and horses will need water. The way they're headed, they couldn't reach Wagon Gap before sundown, but this Indian trace would take them to the rock tanks at Rincon Seep. If we could cut across the desert to Rincon Seep, we might save enough miles to catch up with those riders and confirm my hunch that they're the hombres Texas is hunting for."

Hatfield's hunch had paid off. At noon today, the dust cloud marking the unknown riders had been a good forty miles away, a day's head start. Thanks to Hat-

field's knowledge of the country, they had cut that lead to zero, arriving at Rincon Seep from a different direction, true, but arriving thre before Todd Zero's men had quenched their own thirst.

Hatfield was a sharp hombre, Callis was glad to admit. He had to be, to enjoy the rep he had in Texas. The trouble with Hatfield, he was too damned bossy. He had to be giving orders all the time, orders that didn't make sense some of the time.

Like ringing in the two-bit sheriff of a two-bit cowtown on this Todd Zero manhunt. The government was posting a big reward for the capture of the train robbers and the recovery of the currency shipment. Hatfield stood to cash in that bounty on Zero's topnot, if he ambushed the renegade up at Rincon Seep tonight.

"Damn him, that's why he wanted me out of the way," Chuck Callis growled into the night. "For all I know, he might get onto those saddlebags stuffed full of greenbacks and keep 'em for himself. Nobody around to see him steal that dinero."

The thought translated itself into action; Callis swung his horse around and was about to retrace his route to the ravine where Hatfield's horse was on picket, when a better idea came to him. Fate had dumped a priceless opportunity in his lap.

"That reward's payable on the scalps of Zero's men, same as on the kingpin of the outfit. Reckon I'm the only John Law in Texas who knows where those buckaroos are heading tonight."

Callis swung his horse to the north. The old Indian trail which Zero's men were following to reach Wagon Gap, Callis knew, skirted the north end of Dry Lake. Steep lavarock walls made a perfect ambush trap out of the canyon which the Wagon Gap trail followed, according to Hatfield's description of the country.

Callis spurred his horse into a jog trot. Before he had covered a mile, following the east shore of the lake bed, a gibbous moon had lifted over the shoulder of the mountains to the southeast, filling the night with an argentine glow.

At the north end of the lake, Callis reined up to give his gelding a breather. The lights of Wagon Gap were south of west, now. Had he followed out Hatfield's orders he would have been half way to the cowtown by now.

A tremor of alarm stirred the hairs on Callis's neck-nape. What if Zero's riders traveled faster than he had figured. What if they were ahead of him, impossible to overtake? If they beat him to Wagon Gap, Callis knew his scheme was wrecked before it started.

Callis pulled his Winchester carbine from the saddle boot under his right knee and checked the loads in the magazine. He was an expert shot, even in tricky light like tonight. The advantage of surprise would be his.

"With any luck at all," Callis murmured, "I'll collect the bounty on five dead ones. Shoot their horses out from under any that try to get away, and pick 'em off at my leisure."

It helped allay his nervousness a little, pretending to be sure that Zero's five men were still behind, not ahead of him. He couldn't be sure about that until he reached the canyon which was supposed to be just ahead . . .

LESS than a quarter of a mile beyond the north end of Dry Lake, the moonlight picked out the black chasm of the canyon exactly as Jim Hatfield had described it.

A dozen yards short of the drop-off, Callis reined up, ground-hitched the blowing dun and weighted the reins with a handy rock. He jacked a shell into the breech of the .30-30 and, crouching low, made his way to the rim.

The canyon wasn't deep. Fifty, sixty feet down there, a white sandy bottom showed its twisting streak under the moonbeams. That wind-rippled sand wasn't dimpled by a single pony track.

A great gust of relief blew from Callis's lips. He had reached this spot overlooking the Indian trace in time to intercept Zero's riders. The soft sand muffled the plodding

Hatfield watched in horror as the tornado hit Wagon Gap

hoofs and slowed the riders down, exactly as Hatfield had said would be the case.

Callis hunkered down, curbing the desire to smoke. His eyes were fixed on the near bend of the canyon, where it twisted its way out of the hills from its head at the Rincon Seep. Any moment now, Callis's riders would be along.

He made his plans, letting his imagination run riot. Let the riders all get in view, bunched or single file, and then lay a slug across the trail to let them know he meant business. Maybe drop the leader, Alvarez or whatever his name was, to spook the others.

He wasn't sure if the rewards were payable dead or alive. Probably both. At any rate, he would enter the Texas Rangers an established hero, single-handedly cleaning out Todd Zero's band of cutthroats. He could see the headline in the Encinal Gazette now: LOCAL BOY WIPES OUT ZERO'S WILD BUNCH LONE-HANDED!

A blur of movement, where the trail rounded the bend of the nameless canyon, drove the day-dreams out of Callis's head. Sweat burst in little beads from his forehead and upper lip. A rider was in sight down there, coming into the moonlight, bit rings jingling, saddle leather creaking. Two riders. Three. Another, in Mexican sombrero and serape, trailing a riderless packhorse.

Callis swalowed hard, lifted his Winchester stock to his beardless cheek. He couldn't focus the front sight and the oncoming riders at the same time.

The horsemen were carrying on a running conversation, the way riders will on a mellow moonlit night. The third rider from the front was boasting about the

welcome he would receive from the fair sex in Wagon Gap. The one in the lead grumbled something about wanting a bath and getting his beard shaved off before he rode another mile closer to the border. Whiskers itched too damned much, in this climate.

The rifle exploded in Callis's grasp, the knick of the butt plate numbing his shoulder. His trigger finger had jerked involuntarily, from over tension; he wasn't ready to make himself known yet.

He saw the horses start bucking and rearing as the column came to a dusty halt directly below. Moonshine winked on gun metal and bridle steel.

Then a voice challenged the rookie Ranger on the cliff's edge: *"Que es?* For why you shoot, Señor?"

Callis's ears were still ringing from the unexpected blast of gun-sound. His rifle barrel was shaking so hard he couldn't single out a target, but the riders were still close-bunched down there.

"Drop your g-guns and elevate!" Chuck Callis managed to cry out, his voice breaking like a young teen-ager's, humiliating him.

There was a momentary lull. The riders were bunched so close together, Callis couldn't see if guns were being slipped out of leather or not. The thought flashed across his numbed brain that he made a fine target, skylined against the moon this way.

"Elevate?" a jeering voice called back. "Why in hell should we? Who in hell are you?"

"A slick-ear kid tryin' to scare his elders," the grizzled old man at the end of the line whinnied. "Or a drunken cowhand."

Anger steadied Callis's nerves now.

"I'm a Texas Ranger, that's how slick-eared I am," Callis screamed in a frenzy of rage. "If you boss Todd Zero was alive right now, he'd tell you if I can scare my elders or not."

To Callis's astonishment, every one of the five men grouped in the pit of the shallow canyon jerked his arms skyward. Falling guns made little thudding sounds in the sand.

CONVINCED that he was in complete command of a skittery situation now, Callis called out in a steadier voice, "Todd Zero's lying dead up at the mouth of that cave in Rincon Seep. The rest of you can consider yourself under arrest."

One of the five riders spurred forward, away from the group; there was an exchange of whispers among the other riders as the leader, whom Callis recognized as a swarthy-faced Chihuanhuan, halted his horse almost directly below, the moonlight glinting on a battery of grinning white teeth.

"You killed Señor Zero, you say?"

Callis's chest swelled proudly. "I sure as hell did. I'm chousin' you hombres on down the trail to Wagon Gap and lockin' you up in Sheriff Benson's hoosegow. You ever hear of the famous Tombstone Calaboose in Wagon Gap, the jail built out of tombstones?"

The Mexican nodded, his smile widening.

"And after you lock us up, Señor Rangero, what you do then?"

Callis was too occupied with watching the Mexican to notice that the graybeard in charge of the packhorse had lowered one of his arms now. Graybeard's guns were still in holster, not lying in the dust of the trail.

"After I've taker care of you prisoners," Chuck Callis bragged confidently, "I'll go back to the Seep and pick up that load of greenbacks you boys stole off of the California Flyer last week. Maybe bring in Zero's carcass, if the coyotes ain't beat me to it. Then—"

Whatever Callis intended to say, he never finished his sentence. He didn't even see the flick of red-orange light from the bore of the old man's Remington six-shooter. Nor did he feel the half-ounce of lead that caught him in the ribs, twisted him around and spun him off his feet, into space.

Pedro Alvarez, Zero's segundo, had to

jump his horse back in a hurry to keep from being struck by Chuck Callis's plummeting corpse. The kid's Winchester clattered into the rocks midway up the short cliff and hung there by its lever in a tuft of creosote brush growing out of a fissure in the lava wall.

Unhurriedly, Zero's riders dismounted and led their horses up to form a little ring around the motionless body dressed in the bibless levis, spurred cowboots, faded workshirt and flat-crowned Stetson of an ordinary saddle bum.

Badger Malloy, the brindle-whiskered old Texican who was responsible for the pack horse, jacked open his .44, blew smoke from the bore, and thrust the gun into his holster. He stood by while the others gathered around the dead man, prodding the slack corpse with their boot toes, peering up at the kid's rifle, caught on that bush half-way up the cliff.

"Damned wet-nose kid," someone muttered. "Ain't even shaved yet."

"Who in hell could he be? He ain't a Rangero, that's for sure. Too young."

Highpockets, the tallest of the quintet, lighted up a cheroot and spoke through the smoke: "Common type. Cocky young rooster trying to make himself a rep. Knowing about the Tombstone Jail, I'd say he was from Wagon Gap."

Badger Malloy fingered his beard thoughtfully, watching the rivulet of black, sparkling liquid trickle from the bullet hole in the stranger's breast to be blotted up by the thirsty sand. He had never gunned down a kid before.

Flicking a glance at his ramrod, Alvarez, the old man observed quietly, "We got to take him serious, though. He could be a flank rider for a posse."

Alvarez was scanning the rimrock, the moon shining in his black, reptilian eyes. The Mexican nodded thoughtfully. "He knew Todd was camped back at the Seep," Alvarez commented in Spanish. "But if Todd is dead, like this gringo said, why did not we hear the sound of shooting? I think the boy lied."

"But he wasn't lying about Todd bein' at the Seep, alone."

Alvarez gestured to Highpockets. "Climb to the rim," he gave his brusque instructions, "and see if other riders are around. The rest of us—we ride back to the Rincon to see if Todd Zero is in trouble."

"Or if the dinero is still safe," Badger muttered unheard in his whiskers. He hit the saddle with a sudden grim urgency.

Within minutes the dead man lay alone in the moonlight, save for a foraging armadillo—that piglike, armor-plated carrion scavenger of the Texas badlands—who came snuffling out of a cactus patch, attracted by the effluvium of dead flesh.

CHAPTER III

Hunter and Hunted

JIM HATFIELD made his way back down to the ravine to loosen the girth on Goldy's saddle. It was still thirty minutes to dark.

There was a grim significance in the fact that he did not picket or hobble the magnificent golden stallion for the period when he would be visiting the depths of Rincon Seep for his coming showdown with Texas's most dangerous *bandido*.

The Lone Wolf Ranger was a fatalist. He had to be in his uncertain business, living on borrowed time from day to day, his back a target for any owlhooter who might cross his path.

Hatfield had a supreme confidence that he could take Todd prisoner tonight. But he had to be realistic. He couldn't leave his horse trapped in this brushy ravine to starve in the event he didn't get back tonight.

An outsider, seeing them here together under the stars, would find no visible indication that Jim Hatfield was a lawman. His Ranger star was kept hidden in a secret compartment in the lining of his left boot when he was working incognito on a case.

In other ways he resembled an ordinary tumbleweed rider of the Llano Estecado: flat-crowned gray Stetson, hickory shirt, faded waist overalls, spurred Coffeyville boots. His matched .45 Colt

sixguns in their oak-tanned holsters, slung low at either hip, were not necessarily the advertisement of a law rider; paid gunhawks, even ordinary cowpunchers in a land infested with bad men and bad Indians, went similarly armed.

Ordinarily, Texas Rangers worked in troops or in pairs. Jim Hatfield, dedicating his life to maintaining law and order on the Lone Star frontier, preferred to work alone, and more often than not, incognito. "The Lone Wolf" was more than a nickname, it was a description of the man's way of life, his method of getting a dangerous job done.

Now, tonight, Hatfield knew he was on the verge of the most noteworthy arrest of his spectacular career. He had lost track of how many years Todd Zero had enjoyed the dubious honor of being the top-wanted man on Texas's list of criminals at large. At this very moment, he knew that scattered posses were scouring the west Texas badlands, hoping for the opportunity which Fate had dumped in Hatfield's lap: a chance to slap handcuffs on the slipperiest gunmen of them all, Todd Zero.

And, if young Chuck Callis obeyed orders, before this night was over Zero's entire gang would be in custody, with the help of the sheriff of Wagon Gap.

Hatfield shared his canteen with Goldy, knowing he could refill at the Seep after Zero was in custody. He got dried fruit, jerky and pemmican from his emergency field rations in a cantle pouch and killed half an hour eating. By that time it was dark enough to risk a descent into the Rincon's amphitheater.

He unbuckled his forty-foot reata from Goldy's pommel and set off up the slope, leaving his saddle carbine, field glasses and noisy spurs behind. On a night as quiet as this it would tax his stalking skills to the utmost to be able to invade Todd Zero's camp without detection. Zero was a wary lobo, always on guard; if he saw a shadow move he would shoot first and investigate afterwards.

Reaching the rimrock where he had had his first rewarding glimpse of Zero's riders, Hatfield was startled to hear what sounded like a rifle shot, far off.

For a moment he wondered if Chuck Callis had gotten himself in trouble, crossing Dry Lake. Hatfield had been careful to reassure the rookie that there was no danger from quicksand bogs any more, despite Dry Lake's evil reputation for swallowing up men and animals alike in its white sands.

Hearing no further shots, Hatfield relaxed. The wind bore in from the north west, and Callis was headed south of west. Maybe some cowpuncher, headed for Wagon Gap, had shot a rattlesnake on the trail somewhere out there . . .

Hatfield had already made up his mind that the easiest way into the Rincon was to slide down the face of the cliff with a rope, rather than the slower method of climbing down to the side canyon entering the Rincon, the means by which Todd Zero's riders had reached the waterhole before sunset.

The campfire was still glimmering inside Todd Zero's cave, painting an ever-changing pattern of ebony and scarlet on the rough tufa walls. From his position on the rimrock, the Lone Wolf could see the silhouetted shapes of the outlaw's saddler and pack animal, munching oats on the flat ledge at the cavern's mouth. Horses could be as vigilant as watch dogs, and that was exactly why Zero had staked them there, Hatfield knew.

The only reason Zero had built his cookfire under cover was to keep the blaze from attracting the eye of some cruising rider on higher ridges.

Selecting a pinnacle of time-eroded rock, Hatfield made his lariat fast and very carefully laid the extra rope over the rimrock. The soft breeze rustled the greenery down below, giving him good cover for his descent into the Rincon.

He was seating himself on the cliff's brink and taking his grip on the rope when another shot, flattened and thinned by distance, reached his ears. Once again it was from the north, and this time the report had the heavy concussive quality of a revolver, rather than the sharp, crack-

ing sound of a rifle.

Hatfield felt better, hearing that second shot. It couldn't be a gunfight—say for instance, a law posse from Wagon Gap running into Zero's out-bound quintet of riders. More like a drifter taking a random pot-shot at a target under the stars, to relieve the monotony of a long ride to town.

THE sound of the shot penetrated Zero's cavern hideout, however, for the Lone Wolf Ranger caught sight of the big outlaw emerging from the blackness, standing in the starlight beside his horses while he keened the night for suspicious sounds. Hatfield remained motionless, knowing Zero's eyes would be sweeping the roundabout rim of the amphitheater.

After a few moments, the outlaw headed back inside, his silhouette cutting distinctly across the flicker of the unseen fire further back. The Rincon was filling with a thin haze of woodsmoke from Zero's supper fire.

Exercising only ordinary precaution and silence, Jim Hatfield let himself over the edge and hand-over-hand down the beetling lithic face of the cliff. Thirty feet below his boots touched fractured talus rock, sloping down into the tangled thickets of sycamore, screw-bean mesquite and liveoak which thrived on the oasis's water supply.

Hatfield worked his way with infinite stealth across the bosque of chaparral in the Rincon bottom. Zero's pack pony had caught his scent; the Ranger recognized the animal's warning whicker. But it was impossible to move through the underbrush without making at least a little noise. He would have to hope that Todd Zero would mistake him for an animal paying a nocturnal visit to the seep, as wild life had done for millenniums of time.

Zero came back out to the ledge and vanished inside the ancient Indian cave with the pack horse. Zero was boiling coffee somewhere inside the cliff dwelling, judging from the tantalizing aromas reaching Hatfield's nose.

The real danger in this business, the Lone Wolf fully realized, would come when he started to work his way up the open slope, soon to be bathed in a rising moon's light, which would bring him to the mouth of Zero's hideout cave.

His big hope was that the outlaw leader would be banking on none of the man-hunters in Texas knowing about this *rancheria* lost in the sunbaked Texas wilds. Zero certainly had no way of knowing that a Texas Ranger and his apprentice had reached this same waterhole from an opposite direction, at the same time.

Inch by inch, Hatfield worked his stealthy way toward the dank muddy area surrounding the Seep. The smell of water was maddening to a man whose tissues had been dehydrated by long hours traveling in Texas midsummer heat.

The Lone Wolf Ranger had gained the far rim of the brushy area, only a few feet from the glistening waterhole, when he heard a crunch of spike-heeled boots on rubble, up toward the cave.

Gun palmed, the Lone Wolf Ranger withdrew like a snake into the mottled shadows of an *aliso* thicket, keeping his .45 behind him to prevent a stray shaft of starlight touching gunmetal and betraying his presence in the brush.

An instant later Todd Zero came in view, toting a canvas waterbag. The moon's glow picked out the white leather designs on his batwing chaps, the carved ivory stocks of Sergeant Gillespie's presentation Colts swinging like miniature plow handles from his flanks.

Hatfield pulled in a deep breath and held it. Luck was incredibly good tonight. He wasn't going to have to invade the lion's den after all; the lion was coming to him.

Todd Zero braced his high-heeled boots into the slope as he slid his way down to the Seep. He was barely ten feet away when he uncorked the canvas waterbag and shoved it under the cold pool that had trickled down from the upper tanks to collect in a glacial pothole alongside the old Indian trail.

Bubbles gushed up from the waterbag. Hatfield crouched, poised, hoping that Zero would thrust both hands under water. But the instincts of a hunted man never left him, especially when he knew he was crossing dangerous country. While he filled the buoyant waterbag with his right hand, Zero kept his left handy to his reserve gun.

And, as the lawmen of Texas had learned to their sorrow, Todd Zero was ambidextrous, as skilled with his left hand as with his right, when it came to unlimbering those long ago stolen Ranger sixguns.

Hatfield came to his full height. He did not make an audible sound in so doing, not the slightest whisper of levi denim rubbing against his boot lining, no creaking muscle or joint. And yet Zero, squatting over there on the far side of the ancient Indian trail, must have faintly heard something.

Hatfield saw Zero's head lift, like a bull elk on herd-guarding duty. He saw the outlaw's hand, graceful as a serpent's glide, lift to hover hawk-like an inch above gunhandle. And then Hatfield spoke:

"All right, Zero, just freeze like you are and stand up slow and easy."

Hatfield might have been greeting a fellow poker player across a card table, so low-pitched and completely casual was his voice.

It was a tribute to Todd Zero's iron control that not a muscle jerked on the outlaw's cheek. His posture froze, but did not stiffen. Neither did he obey the order to rise.

Hatfield cocked his Colt .45. In all this earth there is no sound more menacing or premonitory or challenging than the metallic click of a gunhammer being dogged back from a firing pin. Zero's voice held a faint tremor as he spoke:

"Just close hobble the trigger, son." Zero hadn't looked around yet. He knew he was only a hair-trigger's pressure away from taking a point-blank bullet. "I never buck four aces."

VERY slowly, Zero let go the waterbag he had been filling in the Seep. It bobbed, still half full of air, to the surface as Zero withdrew his hand from the water and raised it to hatbrim height, his other hand leaving the vicinity of his gunbutt and climbing with its mate.

Then, standing up, Todd Zero turned to face his captor.

Hatfield had seen this killer before, eight-nine years ago, when the Mexican *rurales* had picked up the outlaw down in Sonora and Hatfield had been dispatched across the border with extradition warants, escorting Zero back to Texas and a murder conviction.

That trek was in both their minds now, for Hatfield saw recognition dawn on Zero's swart, cruel face. He was a quarterbreed Indian and had an Indian's black hair and high cheekbones.

"Jim Hatfield," the outlaw mused. "If any Rangero had to take me in, I am flattered that it turned out to be you. I can imagine your feelings, getting back Sergeant Gillespie's guns again. I doubt if anyone but you could have done it, Señor."

Hatfield moved into the open, wary as if he were approaching a nest full of coiled rattlesnakes. Even with his arms high, Todd Zero was dangerous.

"Turn around," Hatfield said bluntly, not playing to Zero's sense of the melodramatic. "Keep reaching. I want Gillespie's guns first thing."

Zero shrugged and turned his back on Hatfield. This was the man who had wound up at the death house at the Texas state prison at San Castro and, for the first time in the history of that penal institution, had bribed a guard to help him escape. And when the guard tried to collect his Judas pay, it later developed, Zero's thanks had been a knife in the back.

"Bad storm brewing," Zero commented bannally, as Hatfield thrust his gun muzzle against the outlaw's spine. "It'll hit this section by tomorrow daylight, I think. Reminds me of the last cyclone I exper-

ienced, Hatfield. I was hiding out in the *encinal* after I broke out of San Castro—"

"Shut up," Hatfield warned gruffly, knowing Zero's chatter was intended to distract his attention. "Stand hitched, now, while I get you dehorned. Then you can give me your weather reports."

Todd Zero made no comment as Hatfield used his free hand to remove first one, then the other of Sergeant Gillespie's long-lost Colt sixguns from their holsters. For Hatfield, this was a moment he had dreamed of through most of the years he had worn a star, the recovery of gold-plated Peacemaker .45s which were more than just a pair of custom-made firearms, but a symbol of courage and decency in a wild land. As long as these guns had remained in the possession of an outlaw, the Ranger organization considered itself disgraced.

Now, at long last, a Texas Ranger was in possession of the Gillespie Guns, as the newspapers had dubbed them.

"Start walking up to the cave," Hatfield said quietly. "It isn't these gold-plated hoglegs I'm curious about, or how you beat the hangman at San Castro that time, but how soon I can get my hands on the California Flyer currency."

A low, jarring laugh escaped Todd Zero's lips. He turned away from the Seep and started the short, steep climb toward the ledge where the two horses waited.

Midway up the climb, Zero halted, his boots sunk ankle-deep in the soft shale. The cave overhead was not a natural grotto, but had been carved out of the tufa wall by the stone chisels of prehistoric Indians. This slope leading up to the ledge was like the tailing dump of a mine shaft.

Turning to glance over his shoulder at Jim Hatfield, the burly outlaw panted, "I admit to being trapped here like a fool, Ranger. But the loot from the California Flyer—that I cannot turn over, even to bribe you with."

Hatfield, braced on the steep slope a yard below Zero, gestured with his six-gun muzzle for the outlaw to resume climbing.

"You're damned right you're not turning it over, Zero—I'm taking it."

Zero grinned enigmatically. "You'll have to wait till you catch up with my *compañeros*, then. They took the swag with them tonight—split up five ways, in their *alforja* bags."

A cold shock blew through Jim Hatfield like an Arctic wind. Zero spoke with the smug confidence of truth. It was entirely logical that the gang should have split up the California Flyer boodle, so that each man, in emergency, could scatter with his share.

They resumed climbing. Not until Hatfield was scrambling over the rim of the level ledge to stand alongside the panting outlaw did he make up his mind that Zero was lying.

"While we're here, we'll have a look at those saddlebags the packhorse was toting, anyway," the Lone Wolf said. "While I'm checking the inside of that cave, Zero, I'd feel more comfortable knowing you were hogtied. Put your arms together behind your back, wrists touching."

As he spoke, Hatfield reached to a hip pocket of his levis and drew out a glittering pair of nickel-plated handcuffs. Only once in his long criminal career had a lawman ever slapped his fetters on Todd Zero's wrists—the time Zero landed in San Castro's death house. He had sworn then never to wear shackles again.

In the moonlight, Hatfield saw the resignation put its harsh stamp across Zero's face.

"You're going to have to shoot, Hatfield," the outlaw said, hands fisting as he dropped into a fighter's crouch. "No Johnny Law will ever take me alive. I wasn't born to hang. I'm—"

Zero broke off at the very instant he was planning to charge headlong into the very blast of Hatfield's sixgun, choosing suicide to arrest.

An interruption came with equal surprise to hunter and hunted: a rising drumroll of hoofbeats, as a group of riders suddenly burst like buckshot from the

mouth of the Rincon's exit canyon, spurring straight toward the Seep.

A glad cry burst from Tod Zero's throat as he recognized four of his own gang racing into the amphitheater, moonlight shining on naked rifle barrels. It was like a miracle, their return when he needed them most.

"Zero—sing out!" came the hoarse bellow which Tod Zero recognized as that of his henchman Badger Malloy. "Are you okay?"

CHAPTER IV

One Against Odds

JIM HATFIELD faded back from the edge of the grotto's ledge, his tongue tasting the acid taste of pure despair as he saw Zero's henchmen reining up in a cloud of dust before the waterhole below.

Todd Zero stood riveted to his tracks, indecision freezing him there. When the dust cleared, moments from now, the gang would see their chieftan looking down on them. From their low elevation, they had no way of knowing that Zero was covered by a Texas Ranger's gun.

Above the snorting of winded horses, the creak of saddle gear and the jingle of bit rings, Todd Zero heard the Lone Wolf Ranger's swift, low words at his back:

"It's your bet now, Zero. I'm outnumbered, I'm trapped. I wouldn't have a chance if those *buscadors* knew I was here. But they don't. And if they lay siege to this cave, Zero, you won't be alive to share it, you won't live to see me starved out or gunned down."

Alvarez called out harshly in Spanish as he caught sight of Todd Zero looking down at them from the ledge:

"Are you all right, El Jefe? A rider who called himself a Texas Ranger said you were dead here at the Rincon Seep."

Crouched at the grotto mouth, out of range of the outlaws' view but within a point-blank shot of Zero's big shape, Jim Hatfield stifled a groan at the Mexican outlaw's news.

Chuck Callis must have tried to make a hero of himself tonight, waylaying Todd's gang. Calling himself a Ranger, making his brag. There wasn't a chance in a thousand, Jim Hatfield realized, that his rookie *compañero* was still alive.

"Answer him, Zero!" Hatfield called out in a voice too soft to carry to the hostile ears below. "Make out everything is okay here. Unless you're serious about committing suicide."

Todd Zero's face was dripping with perspiration. Hatfield saw him snap out of his trance and raise a hand in trembling salute.

"How—how's that, amigo?" Zero called back, in Spanish. "You tangled with a Rangero?"

The men had not yet dismounted, down at the Seep. It seemed to satisfy them, seeing their boss standing uninjured and apparently alone, up there in the moonlight.

"It was a strange thing," Alvarez said. "We were riding down the Wagon Gap Canyon when this rifleman covers us from the south rim, telling us he is a Texas Rangero. He said you were killed, that he had left you here at the Seep."

Nervous laughter issued from the other riders. Badger Malloy said in English, "You better come with us to town, Todd. We left Highpockets checking to see if that kid was riding with a posse, but even if he was riding solo, it's too risky leaving you here alone. He knew you were at the Seep, remember."

Todd Zero was breathing hard. He knew if he betrayed the slightest agitation before his men they might get suspicious and come up to the cave.

"Look, men," Zero called out. "We're completely out of grub except what you shared with me tonight and which I've already eaten. You've got to get to town to eat—right?"

"Yeah, that's right," a voice agreed.

"The whole state of Texas is looking for a six-man gang," Zero went on, "so I better not ride with you. I—"

A sudden rumble of hoofs from the lower canyon brought a cry from Alvarez:

"*Hola*—here comes Highpockets. We see what he has to say, amigos."

Jim Hatfield sent a warning whisper to his prisoner: "The kid your men shot was a rookie I was training, Zero. I'd sent him over to Wagon Gap to notify the sheriff and he decided to try for some bounty money. Highpockets will confirm that."

Zero paced up and down the rim of the ledge, still caught between the horns of a dilemma that would cost him his life if he made the wrong move.

"I'm a fool to believe you, Hatfield," Zero panted in a voice too low to reach his men, "but I got to. If Highpockets doesn't stampede 'em, I'll send 'em on to town."

THE incoming rider reined to a halt before his compadres. Hatfield and Zero distinctly heard Highpockets' report:

"The kid was alone, not with a posse, men. I found his horse easy enough. Dry rations in the cantle bags, tracks easy to read. He come from the southwest, skirtin' the dry lake."

Badger Malloy commented thoughtfully, "This thing ain't such a mystery, boys. We know the word's out that we're headin' for the border. This is the only waterhole within miles, so this kid was probably sent over this afternoon to scout it, just in case. He must of seen us when we rode out this evening."

"Sure," Highpockets agreed. "He thought he could get the jump on us and cash in on our bounties."

Todd Zero's nervous tension had finally become intolerable. The boss outlaw stood up, shouting for attention.

"With maybe a tornado moving our way tonight, we can't afford to waste time arguing," Zero said. "Our horses are played out from six days and nights of runnin' and none of you have had a good meal in twenty-four hours. So get going on your way to town, all of you!"

Malloy called out tentatively, "How about us takin' the dry lake short-cut, boss?"

"No," Zero shouted. "If the storm strikes before you get back tonight you'd be safe in the canyon. Out on the dry lake you could get scattered. If you'd ever

A TALL TEXAS TALE

GOOD OLD DAYS

THE WILDEST, orneriest, mangiest badman in all Houston finally met his match one summer evening and was gunned down by the town marshal. Since he'd been around Houston for many years, he was given a fitting burial.

After his coffin was lowered into the grave, all of the townspeople stood around the excavation waiting for someone to say a few kind words about the deceased. For a long while, however, it seemed that none of that kind could be said.

At long last, one old codger, who had been acquainted with the badman longer than the others, lifted his hand and said, "Folks, there wasn't many could shoot as fine a game of marbles as old Rip here, when he was a kid."

—Howie Lasseter

been in a real Texas cyclone you'd know how dangerous they are."

There was a short pause. Then Malloy said, "Too bad you won't come with us, Todd, but you're too well known to risk it, as usual. And I guess this cave is the best storm cellar we're apt to run across, at that."

Jim Hatfield saw Todd Zero relax for the first time. In view of the approaching storm, his men might have rebelled at leaving the Rincon tonight. Hatfield was positive Zero hadn't given a secret signal to tip off his men that anything was wrong. Todd Zero was well aware that the Texas Ranger at his back would gun him down if worse came to worst.

"All right, boys," Alvarez sang out. "Hit the saddle. We've lost an hour's time. We could have been over in Wagon Gap buying horses by now."

The thudding of hoofs and the sound of saddle gear told Jim Hatfield that the crisis was over at last. Zero's men were remounting.

"One last word, men!" Zero called down to the group. "This storm may veer off and never hit us at all. But if it should, take cover wherever you are. Under no circumstances attempt to buck a hurricane in the open, on horseback. Adios, now."

A vast relief went through Jim Hatfield as he heard the men spur their hoof-sore mounts down the Rincon trail. It had been touch and go there, but Todd Zero's masterful job of acting had convinced his gang that he was alone up here.

Zero turned to face Hatfield.

"I'll never know," the outlaw said bleakly, "why I didn't take my chances and try to rejoin my men. The basic situation as regards you and me still applies, Hatfield. I wasn't born to hang. I still mean that."

Before the Lone Wolf could answer, a shout from the departing riders made him break off. Todd Zero, jerking around and staring off down the trail, suddenly turned pale as banana meat.

"Something's wrong, Hatfield!" the outlaw whispered. "The boys must have smelled a rat. They're coming back!"

Despair touched the Ranger. "It's up to you," he said, "whether either of us leaves this Rincon alive tonight."

CHAPTER V

Death at the Rincon

THE hoofbeats died out at the foot of slope. Todd Zero called out, a touch of anger in his voice: "What in hell's wrong now? I want to hit the hay before I fall over asleep."

Badger Malloy was spokesman for the gang this time, instead of Alvarez: "We think it's plumb loco for you to camp here tonight, boss, or for us to return to the Rincon. Come daylight, somebody might trail that kid's sign to the rimrock where he spotted us."

Malloy and the others waited for their leader's reaction. It dawned on Hatfield in this moment that Todd Zero was not the absolute dictator legend had him pictured to be, with his word as supreme law, his orders not to be disputed. Apparently the Zero owlhoot gang worked as a team in times of crisis, majority vote overruling the leader if need be.

"You—you may be right," Zero said, a shake showing in his voice for the first time. "I'll have to move camp. But where?"

"How about the lavabeds at the south end of the dry lake, boss?" Highpockets suggested. "That's only on hour's ride south of Wagon Gap, and closer to the border."

"There's no water, though," reminded another voice.

"Or feed for the broncs, if we hide out over tomorrow and head for the Rio Grande after dark tomorrow night," Alvarez said.

The hairs stirred at Hatfield's neck-nape as he heard sounds which told him that men were already out of saddle and beginning to scramble up the steep shale slope toward the cave. Another half minute would see a showdown explode—the springing of a trap which Hatfield knew

he could not possibly escape. Not with the odds as heavy as these. . . .

"They're on their way up," Zero whispered frantically, "to get their soogans and warsacks. There's not a thing in God's name I can do, Hatfield—you've got to duck back out of sight."

Hatfield had no knowledge of the interior of the grotto at his back. He knew that the outlaws' gear was piled up against the base of the cliff just to the right of the cavern's mouth. Zero's horse, and the pack pony with the California Flyer's loot, were back out of sight inside the cave.

"Back up fast," Hatfield whispered his order. "Keep to the shade in the mouth of the tunnel, where I can see you, and where they won't notice you're not packing Gillespie's guns. Hustle it!"

As he spoke, Jim Hatfield came to his feet and, in three quick strides, ducked into the pit blackness of the grotto. Woodsmoke fumed out from the dying cookfire inside, bringing the odors of horse manure and sweat-moistened saddle blankets.

Todd Zero moved back across the open ledge and reached the mouth of the cave just as the first three heads of his outlaw riders appeared above the rim. With the moon at their backs, Jim Hatfield had no way of distinguishing the features of those men; they could have been silhouettes cut out of black cardboard. To a superstitious man, it would almost seem that the black gods of evil were protecting Zero's riders from being seen and identified by a lawman.

Zero stepped over to the pile of bedrolls and started tossing them out onto the open flat ground as the five riders all joined him. Zero, knowing his life depended on his fast talking in these next few moments, knowing that Hatfield's gun covered him from the darkness, kept up a running prattle:

"We'll rest up all day tomorrow in the lava beds, move on toward the Rio Grande all tomorrow night, with any luck at all we can cross over the river Monday night."

In the darkness behind him, Hatfield could hear the two horses moving around, the pop of a live coal, a far sound like water dripping. The cool air currents that flowed past him carried mingled odors, dank and musty.

No man struck a match. They had come up here to collect their bedrolls and other gear, and one by one, hauling their possibles from the pile, they turned and headed back toward their horses. Pedro Alvarez, with the big Mexican hat and the rainbow hued serape, was finally the only one left out on that moon-drenched rock shelf in front of the cavern.

"Something on your mind, amigo?" Todd Zero asked, keeping just inside the shadow of the grotto ceiling.

Hatfield felt his pulses speed up. Alvarez was acting strangely. He was looking around, looking down at the footprints in the dust. The Ranger thought, He can't possibly have spotted a strange set of boot prints in all that tangled sign.

"The dinero," Alvarez said suddenly. "I have talked of this, El Jefe, on several occasions the past few days, as you remember."

Hatfield saw the outlaw chief thrust hooked thumbs under his cartridge belts. Todd Zero was facing his first faint show of insubordination in his ranks, the Ranger sensed.

"You and Badger think we should split up the swag, go our separate ways, Pedro?"

Alvarez nodded. He thrust a black Mexican cigarillo in his lips and fingered the band of his sombrero for a match. Jim Hatfield shrank further back in the shadows, keeping his gun behind him, as the Mexican outlaw thumbed flame from the match and lifted it behind cupped hands to fire up his cigarette.

HATFIELD, peering off past the taut shape of Todd Zero, had his good long look at the stained-leather, pock-pitted face of Pedro Alvarez, his rat-tail mustaches, his knife-scarred cheek and temple. He found himself thinking, there's one member of the Zero gang I

could identify in court.

"You're getting careless, Pedro," Todd Zero said curtly. "Lighting cigarettes at night, when we're on the dodge."

Alvarez blew out the match, flicked it aside. Down below, the others were busy lashing bedrolls and warsacks behind saddle cantles, ready to hit the trail. Alvarez's gear remained at his feet as he returned his chieftan's cold stare.

"You also get careless, *amigo mio,*" Alvarez said carefully. "You do not wear your guns. *Porque*? Why is this so?"

Zero hesitated, then gestured behind him into the cave.

"I was fixing to hit my blankets in there when I heard you hombres riding back, that's all."

From down by the Seep came Highpockets's impatient yell: "What's keepin' you, Pedro? Let's light a shuck! Liquor an' women an' high-stakes poker are waitin' in Wagon Gap!"

Alvarez called back, "*Uno momento.* Señor Zero, why do you keep all the dinero in your charge? Why do you refuse to divide it on this side of the Rio Grande?"

Hatfield saw Zero's jaw muscles twitch in silhouette.

"If we divided the swag now we would split six ways," he said hoarsely. "You know how I operate, Alvarez. The only thing that holds us together as a team is that dinero. I say our team is worth holding together."

Alvarez stepped away from the spot where he had been standing and reached down to pick up his bedroll. The red coal of his cigarette glowed as he sucked smoke into his lungs, backing away toward the lip of the slope which fell away to the Seep below.

At the rim of the ledge, Alvarez tossed his bedroll down the slope behind him. And then, without warning, the Mexican lifted a sixgun from leather and thumbed back the hammer. The gun was aimed straight at Todd Zero.

"What in hell's this?" Zero demanded in English.

Alvarez's reply came like a knell of doom:

"You plan to doublecross us tonight, Señor. You have met someone here at Rincon Seep. I saw the tracks of his boots in the dust, tracks which match none of ours."

Jim Hatfield smothered a groan of despair. Even in the tricky moonlight, this Mexican's incredible eye for detail had spotted Hatfield's bootprints out of all the man-sign in the trampled dust of this cave-mouth ledge.

"Your confederate," Alvarez went on, "must be hiding back in the tunnel now. Unless you send him out, and the dinero with him, you are looking eternity in the face, El Jefe."

Todd Zero was caught in an impossible dilemma, doomed no matter what choice he made. He did the one thing possible under the circumstances. His gun holsters being empty, he simply dropped flat on his face.

Instinct made Jim Hatfield fling himself sideways out of the line of fire as the Mexican segundo jerked triggers. A .45 slug slammed into the cave, drilling the blackness where the Lone Wolf had been standing an instant before.

It was instinct, too, that made Hatfield trip his own gunhammer. For Alvarez had seen the Ranger by the light of his own gun-flash. Through pluming gunpowder smoke Hatfield saw Alvarez whirl violently around under the impact of a slug smashing him high on the right side, near the armpit.

Mortally hit, the Mexican toppled out of sight and rolled down the slope to the waterhole before the dumfounded eyes of his *compañeros.*

Jim Hatfield pounced forward, reaiming his smoking sixgun muzzle into Todd Zero's side as the big outlaw came to a kneeling position there in the mouth of the hideout cave.

"We're both done for," the outlaw groaned. "They got the idea I'm trying to double cross 'em and they're wise now that you were hiding out behind me."

Working fast, Hatfield notched his hand-

cuffs over Todd Zero's wrists, fettering his arms together.

"I had to shoot," the Ranger panted hoarsely, "or the Mexican's next shot would have got you."

Down at the foot of the slope came a sound of confused voices, grinding hoofs on rubble. Jim Hatfield was reloading his sixgun after ejecting the spent shell when a ghastly silence fell, out there in the Rincon.

And the bull-deep roar of old Badger Malloy hit the eardrums of the two men, outlaw and lawman, trapped in the Rincon cave:

"Pedro cashed in, Todd. But not before he tipped us off that you had an *amigo* waitin' up there to gun him down. There ain't enough money in them alforjas to buy your way out of that hole in the wall, Todd. You and your double-crossin' confederate won't be alive to spend that dinero, come sunrise!"

Something seemed to snap inside Todd Zero's skull in this instant. Before Jim Hatfield could make a move to stop him, Zero leaped to his feet, screaming desperately into the moon lit night:

"It's a Texas Ranger who's got me trapped, you fools—Ranger Jim Hatfield! He shot Alv—"

The Lone Wolf's sixgun lifted and fell, clipping Todd Zero across the skull and wilting him, pinching off his bellow in mid-syllable. But Zero had let the cat out of the bag, for sure.

From the group of outlaw riders down at the waterhole, Malloy's startled words broke a momentary stunned silence:

"Ranger Hatfield? We've trapped real big game tonight, compañeros. And we ought to be ashamed of ourselves for ever doubtin' Todd Zero."

CHAPTER VI

The Mysterious Voice

ZERO lay crumpled up on his side in the dust of the cavern floor, temporarily dead to the world. Behind them, shielded by blackness so absolute that Hatfield could almost feel it pressing against his eyes, came the occasional noises of the horses further back in the subterranean stable.

Flat on his stomach, the Lone Wolf crawled outside and over to the blot of shadow cast by a jackpine scrub across the rim of the ledge. At the risk of a bullet in the brain, he raised his head for a quick look down at the waterhole.

Pedro Alvarez lay where he had died, in a crumpled heap at the edge of the waterhole. Out on the Rincon floor the night was alive with the scurrying sounds of men retreating into the brush to tie up their horses.

A gun flashed off to Hatfield's left and he ducked back automatically as a late-arriving slug ricochetted off the ledge a foot away, whining straight-up into space with a dying banshee wail of sound.

Sweat popped from Hatfield's skin as he wriggled well back. The situation he faced was as hopeless as he could ever remember experiencing during his career behind the star, and no matter how he sized it up, it seemed inevitable that the Rincon would be his grave.

Four armed and desperate men, with Alvarez's death to avenge, had him trapped here. From the angle of the moon it was obvious that this north rim of the Rincon would be bathed in bright light until daylight came. That would prevent him making a run for it, outside the cave.

Above him was the sheer and beetling cliff forming the north barrier of the amphitheater. Come daylight, Zero's outlaws could crawl up the south slope and, hiding behind boulders and brush, pour a deadly fire into the cavern.

Hatfield's brain leaped to the possibilitiy of withstanding a siege, with Zero as his prisoner. But without water to assuage their thirst, he doubted if he or Zero would be able to endure tomorrow's blazing heat, inside the stifling recessess of that cavern. Such caves seemed to soak up heat and radiate it back like the walls of a stove, in locations where the sun's rays could actually shine into the

opening, as here.

Getting water from the Seep was obviously impossible. Hatfield's canteen was slung from Goldy's saddle horn, on the far side of the ridge to the south of the Rincon, and the fact that Zero had come down to fill his waterbag at the seep, thereby running into Ranger sixguns, hinted that the outlaw had no water supply in the grotto either. After all, he had only planned to camp there for a few hours tonight, not stand off a long siege.

Momentary outrage swept through him, realizing that this mess was all Chuck Callis's fault. Why, if the rookie had obeyed orders, the sheriff would be on his way across the dry lake by now, backed by a sizable Wagon Gap posse.

Well, Callis had paid for his egotism with his life. The coyotes were probably quarreling over his bones about now, with the buzzards ready to finish the job when daylight came. Somehow, in spite of the fact that Callis's treachery would prob-

"If that's what I think it is, we're really lost."

Hatfield hurried back to the black maw of the cave, realizing that he would make a target in this moonlight for the first gunman to scale the south slope above the level of this ledge.

They're sure to spot the lariat I used to slide down into the Rincon, Hatfield thought grimly, and that'll lead 'em to my horse. It made him feel sick at the stomach, Goldy falling into the cruel hands of Todd Zero's owlhoot gang.

ably cost him his own life. Jim Hatfield felt sorry for the kid, rather than vindictive. Callis had put personal glory ahead of public service, and it was not an uncommon flaw in human beings. Just a flaw which a man couldn't have and be a Texas Ranger in the true Ranger tradition, that was all.

He crawled back to where Todd Zero lay, blood seeping from a bruise over his ear where Hatfield had gun-whipped him.

Hoisting the unconscious outlaw over his shoulder, Hatfield headed back to where the flickering light of the dying campfire revealed an elbow turn to the cavern.

Rounding that bend, Hatfield saw where the cavern widened out into a chamber as big as the barroom of an average saloon. Instead of being an Indian-made excavation, as Hatfield had assumed earlier in the day, he now realized that this was a natural cave. Stalactites hung like stone icicles from a ceiling twenty feet or more overhead. The limestone drippings had formed stalagmites on the level floor of the cavern, many of them scribbled with Indian pictographs and the names, dates and initials of latter-day visitors to the Rincon Seep.

TWO horses were tethered to nearby stalagmites—Todd Zero's saddler and his treasure-toting pack animal. Both were foraging the last flakes of oats from the bottom of canvas and leather nosebags.

Out in the center of the rocky chamber, the coals of Todd Zero's mesquite wood fire were blazing up in a last display of flame. A coffee pot was set on two rocks above the fire, accounting for some of the smells which had reached Hatfield's ears.

There was no way of telling how far back the cave went; the range of firelight was not more than ten or fifteen feet.

Hatfield had his look around. Over near the west wall of the cave he came to a spread-out tarp and a bedroll. Todd Zero's soogans, no doubt; Hatfield deposited the unconscious burden of the outlaw's six-foot frame onto the blankets, debating whether he ought to handcuff the prisoner with his arms hugging a stalagmite, just to play it safe.

A rifle thundered out in the Rincon and a caroming bullet came rattling around the corner of the tunnel, filling the cavern with little motes of disturbed limestone dust where the slug ricochetted, finally spending itself with a clatter.

"That's how they'll finish me off, most likely," Hatfield said grimly. "With a billiard-shot off the rock walls of this tomb."

He shuddered, remembering what a nasty, ragged wound a glancing, misshapen bullet could create, as compared to the clean drilled hole of a direct hit.

Over in the shadows beyond Todd Zero's bed he came across the tooled-leather *alforja* bags he had seen on the packhorse before sunset, through his binoculars.

The strong sense that death and oblivion were not far off for him had not yet overpowered Jim Hatfield's determination to go down fighting, nor had it dulled his keen curiosity. Unless he was mistaken, those saddle bags were stuffed with the loot of the California Flyer, packages of paper greenbacks and yellowbacks.

Unbuckling the strapped flaps of one of the saddlebags, Hatfield carried them over beside the fire and squatted down, fanning the dying embers with his Stetson to make the flames give off some light.

Then he opened the cantle pouch and had his look at the contents.

Although he saw exactly what he expected to see, the enormous value of Todd Zero's haul still overwhelmed his senses. The saddlebag was packed tightly with bundle after bundle of fresh currency straight from the Treasury Department in the national Capital.

Hatfield tugged out one of the bundles. Thousand dollar bills, this package. He riffled the edges with his thumb as he would riffle the cards in a pack. This one bundle of currency probably exceeded the take from the average bank or stage holdup—and there were a hundred bundles like it in this bag.

The Lone Wolf Ranger's stubbled, fatigue-rutted face went grim as his thoughts made full circle, back to reality. He had recovered the biggest outlaw loot in the history of Texas or the Western frontier, most likely, but his chances of returning it to the Federal government were remote. Bottled up in a dead-end cavern without food and water, with the mouth of that cavern guarded day and

night by four of the most dangerous criminals along the border.

"One thing sure," the Ranger said aloud, "I'll feed half a million dollars' worth of paper money to Zero's campfire rather than leave it for his hoodlums to pick up."

Hatfield stood up, peering around at the blackness, at the ghostly shapes of the limestone formations. Those shadows offered tempting refuge from outlaw guns, but the Ranger knew only too well how dangerous it would be to go exploring the outer limits of this cavern. A man could get lost and go insane, wandering the labyrinthian twists and turns of a limestone cave, if he didn't equip himself with lanterns and tools and food and water rations.

Another rifle bullet ricochetted around the corner of the cavern entrance and dimly in the faint glow of the dying fire Jim Hatfield saw Todd Zero's saddle horse twitch, as if stung by a horse fly, and then before Hatfield's astonished eyes, collapse limply against the packhorse and slump to the floor. The pack animal snorted with alarm and pulled away, its short lead rope coming wire-taut around the stalagmite snubbing post.

Hatfield lifted Sergeant Gillespie's gold-plated Colt .45s from the waistband of his chaps and hefted them. Somehow, it seemed fitting that he stand off the outlaw attack with the guns he had rescued from Gillespie's murderer tonight. Not that he anticipated being able to draw a bead on any one of Todd Zero's gang even when daylight came. There was no need for any of them to take an unnecessary risk. All they had to do was guard the cavern mouth, day and night, until their Texas Ranger prisoner either died or surrendered.

DOWN on all fours, to avoid possible ricochet lead, Jim Hatfield worked his way back to the tunnel mouth. Across the Rincon, he had a clear view of an outlaw sitting astride a white gypsum boulder at the foot of the south cliff, smoking a cigarette.

"Too far for a hand gun," Hatfield muttered, "but he's takin' a hell of a risk of gettin' hit by a saddle gun."

Suddenly a voice, near at hand—somewhere just below the level of the ledge above the waterhole—startled Jim Hatfield, by calling his name.

When the Ranger did not answer, uncertain as to what the outlaw's game was, the voice continued: "I know you're in there, Hatfield, because I heard Zero identify you with his dying breath. I know Todd Zero is dead. I likewise know you've spotted that half-million in bank notes that Zero was guarding, by now. So, maybe we could make a deal, you and I."

Hatfield moved back until he was sure he was invisible from anyone searching the tunnel mouth with high-powered night glasses.

"Who are you and what's the proposition?" he called back.

After a pause, the voice resumed: "Monicker here is Badger Malloy. With the Chihuahuan straw-boss gone, thanks to your bushwhack slug tonight, I reckon I'm kingpin of what's left of Zero's wild bunch, Hatfield."

Hatfield let a few moments lapse, while his eyes raked the moonlit talus slopes off across the rincon. He imagined he could see the spiderweb-thin shadow his dangling rope traced across the limestone cliff on the far side of the Rincon. So near and yet so far, that rope he could climb to reach Goldy and escape.

"My proposition is this, Hatfield," Malloy resumed. "You toss out them saddlebags where I can grab 'em without making a target out of myself. Me and the boys will get started for Mexico—"

"You wouldn't make it," Hatfield jeered. "The Big Bend is swarming with posses. They'll find me here, eventually. All I have to do is squat and wait."

Malloy was silent for a moment. "A pretty thin bluff, Ranger, and you know it. There's a big sandstorm blowing in from the north. I figure it'll hit this section sometime after daylight tomorrow. That storm will give me and the boys cover as far as the Rio Grande."

Hatfield flung back another taunt: "You wouldn't ride off and leave Todd Zero in the hands of the law, would you?"

"Zero's dead. If he was alive—if he is alive—have him sing out."

"That's impossible. I gun-whipped him."

There was another long pause. Then a blur of motion, off to the left, made Hatfield tense up, swinging his gun to cover a new threat. But he held his fire. What he saw was a white rag tied to a stick. A flag of true, held by a human hand just out of Hatfield's range of vision.

"I think we can make a deal," Malloy's voice identified himself as the holder of the white flag. "Your life in exchange for that train robbery haul. How about a face-to-face talk, Hatfield, and a chance to see if my boss is still alive?"

"The problem," Hatfield replied, "is how to meet face to face, without gunplay, isn't it?"

"Toss me your Ranger badge to prove who you are," Malloy yelled, "and I'll trust you to honor a white flag. All I'm after is that dinero—and Todd Zero, if he's alive. I bear you no grudge, Ranger."

Hatfield hesitated. He was handicapped by a sense of honor, such as his adversary did not have to adhere to. His innate sense of fair play made it unthinkable for him to violate a flag of truce, even when it was offered by a blackguard like Badger Malloy, now the number two man in Zero's gang. Much as he could use a hostage to play in this life-or-death game

against the three other gunmen out there in the Rincon, a Texas Ranger could not stoop to treachery involving the violation of a pact of honor.

"Aren't you taking a hell of a risk, trusting a badge toter?" Hatfield called back, stalling for time.

The flag of true disappeared from view.

"If you're a Texas Ranger, I'll respect your word," Malloy gave Hatfield the most profound compliment he had ever received, considering its source. "To show you my heart's on the right side, I'll toss you something right now that's more valuable to a man under siege than a thousand saddlebags full of dinero."

AS HE spoke the words, Malloy tossed an object over the stony ledge—something which gurgled as it flew through the air, and clanged metallically as it bounced on the ground.

A canteen, gleaming wet from immersion in the seep. Water, without which no man could live for long in the bake-oven which was the Indian cavern.

"If you choose to keep us waiting," Malloy went on, careful to keep himself well out of sight below the rim, "that canteen will last you a day or two. But why punish yourself, when you know we got you dead to rights anyhow?"

Hatfield reached under the top of his left cowboot and drew the badge of the Texas Rangers from the secret compartment in the boot's lining—a furbished silver star enclosed in a silver ring, the most honored badge in the Lone Star State, the possession of which was not to be taken lightly.

"No dice, Malloy," Hatfield called finally, deciding not to use his Ranger star as bait to draw Malloy up into view. "I can smell your double-cross a mile off. That canteen—the water is probably poisoned, or loaded with salt. And if I walked out into the open to pick up the canteen, you've got *compañeros* roosting around the far side of the Rincon, just begging for a chance to line their gunsights on me. You can go to hell, Malloy."

There was a long silence, during which Hatfield fingered his law badge and waited for whatever was to come. Even if he tried to buy his way out of this trap with Todd Zero's bags of loot, he knew these renegades could leave a man behind to drygulch him as he left the Indian cave. But using those saddlebags full of U. S. currency would be bargaining with criminals, and that was contrary to the very code of honor a Ranger lived by.

"Hatfield," Malloy finally broke the silence out in the Rincon, "I don't know if you're stupid or the bravest man I ever locked horns with. But I can tell you this. If you don't make up your mind to dicker, and damned fast, you won't be alive when daylight comes."

Hatfield jeered derisively. "You talk big, Malloy, but *habla* is cheap. How do you aim to cash in my chips?"

It was Malloy's turn to jeer.

"Smoke you out. Smother you, if you don't smoke easy. Me and the boys could fill the mouth of that tunnel with dry creosote brush and greasewood snags in an hour's time, without exposing ourselves to your guns. Set it afire, and you wouldn't last long."

Malloy's threat brought a strange, macabre reaction to Jim Hatfield. Times without number he had faced desperate odds, seemingly insurmountable dangers in the past, and had lived to ride again. But tonight, somehow, some inner instinct seemed to be telling him that he had reached trail's end, that death was inevitable before this night was out.

That fatalism, that resignation to the inevitable, was new to Hatfield's make-up. It startled him, and disturbed him. The feeling was so strong that he lifted the Ranger star and pinned it to his shirt, so that if he was asphyxiated by the renegade's smudge tonight, when he entered the cavern after the loot he would find him wearing his badge of office.

"You're forgetting," Hatfield shouted defiantly to Malloy's ultimatum, "that if I smother to death, so does Todd Zero."

"We figure he's already gone, Hatfield."

The Ranger smiled bitterly. He was just

beginning to realize that Todd Zero wasn't a bargaining lever any more. He had quarreled with his henchmen, and their loyalties were not strong enough to make make them shun Zero's murder at their hands.

"You're also forgetting," Hatfield added, "that it is in my power to destroy those greenbacks—in your own fire. The ashes of half a million dollars in paper money wouldn't be worth much, would they, Malloy?"

"We check the bet to you, Ranger," Malloy called back. "Toss out the dinero, or we start gathering dry brush."

The faintest alien sound behind him startled Hatfield, like an indrawn breath, so close that it seemed to be within hand's reach.

Suddenly a voice whispered from the shadows along the cavern wall behind him:

"Don't be startled, Ranger Hatfield. I'm a deputy sheriff from Wagon Gap. Stall that *buscador* along, put him off until you and I have had a pow-wow of our own."

A gelid rime of sweat glistened on Hatfield's cheeks. The whisper had come from less than an arm's reach away. Maybe it came from a cowtown deputy, hiding out in Todd Zero's cave.

But if so, that deputy was a girl!

CHAPTER VII

Girl Deputy

HATFIELD tipped his gun toward the cave ceiling. For all he knew, the owner of that voice might have a gun aimed at his brisket this very instant.

It was enough to shatter the nerves of anybody, discovering that he had shared this Indian grotto with a third person all this time, and a female, at that. Unless his imagination was working overtime, Hatfield could detect the heady aroma of a woman's hair, the indefinable woman-scent that, under different circumstances, could put a riot of heat in a man's blood.

"Who in thunder are you?" Hatfield managed to whisper finally.

A shadow detached itself from the near wall of the cavern. Against the faint glimmer of dying campfire light, the shadow took on substance: the classic outlines of a feminine form, wide of hip, and narrow of waist, with a swelling bosom and long, slim legs—a girl of five foot three or four, wearing man's clothing. And glinting from her shirt front, catching the glow of moonlight out in the Rincon, was the unmistakeable outline of a ball-pointed silver star. A deputy's badge?

"I'm Nelsie DeHaven," the girl whispered, moving closer in the darkness. Moonlight reflecting off the white shale plateau in front of the cavern glinted off gunmetal, telling Hatfield that this amazing apparition who had materialized as if by magic was indeed toting a gun. "I've been camped in this cliff dwelling since day before yesterday—under orders of the sheriff of Frontera County."

Before Hatfield could sort out Nelsie DeHaven's astonishing information in his own mind, he was jarred back to reality by Malloy's voice outside:

"It's so damned simple, saving your own bacon, Hatfield. Toss out them *alforja* bags—heave 'em over the edge. After we make sure you ain't stuffed 'em with dead leaves or something, me and the boys will ride out. You'll see us ride out."

Hatfield's brain was reeling. Out front, a known outlaw was trying to dicker with him—his life in return for a half million dollars of stolen U.S. paper money. And behind him, close enough to touch, the shadow of a girl who claimed to be a deputy from Wagon Gap.

One was as fantastic as the other. Neither seemed real.

Nelsie's soft whisper reached his ears again: "Tell him you'll pow-wow with Todd Zero, let him know in ten minutes what your answer will be. Go ahead—tell him!"

Hatfield cleared his throat. He felt foolish, taking orders from a girl who was very little more than a disembodied voice.

"Malloy, I'll tell you this," the Ranger called out to the bandit below the rim.

"Your boss isn't dead, he was just knocked out. He's reviving. Give me ten minutes to auger this thing out with him. Then I'll tell you whether we'll make a deal—or whether we'll gamble on holding out against your siege."

From the base of the south cliff came Highpockets' jeering yell: "Siege, hell—we can set fire to the brush and smoke you out of there, Ranger. Under cover of this storm that's blowing up."

Malloy snarled an oath of impatience. "*'Sta bueno,* but shake it up, Ranger. Me and the boys, we got to light a shuck, shake this Texas dust off our boots. I'll give you ten minutes by the clock. If you ain't sent Zero out here with them saddle bags of green stuff by then, we'll damn soon find a way to get you out of that rat-hole."

Hatfield felt the girl's hand touch his arm. She was leading him back along the entrance tunnel, around the bend in the cavern to where he could see the coals of the dying campfire silhouetting the packhorse and Zero's dead mount.

A match spurted flame as Nelsie ignited it with her thumb nail.

"Take a good look," she whispered, "so we'll know what we each look like. Then we start talking."

The match flame held not more than ten seconds, but during that time Jim Hatfield got an eyefull of one of the loveliest specimens of Texas beauty he had run across in a coon's age.

Nelsie DeHaven had an oval face, sun-bronzed and aglow with the health that came from a life in the saddle. Her eyes were as blue as Texas larkspurs and her hair had the red-gold sheen of fine-spun metal filaments, framing her face in soft ringlets and falling to her shoulders.

She was in riding costume—a beaded buckskin vest, plum-colored blouse cut man-fashion, bibless overalls, polished taffy-brown boots on the tiniest feet Hatfield could remember ever having seen on a mature woman. And this deputy—the star on her breast proved she was a deputy—was a mature woman, all right. Every curving line of her defied the masculine clothes to lessen her charms, the impact she would make on a male's senses.

SEEING her under such extraordinary circumstances—in a soot-black cave populated with the ghosts of long extinct Indians, a cave that might become a pyre for either or both of them—made Jim Hatfield actually doubt his senses when she blew the match out and became again just a seductive shadow in the gloom.

"Suppose you tell me what this is all about, Miss?" Jim Hatfield whispered. "Have you been here—all along?"

Nelsie's head bobbed affirmatively. Her flat-crowned white Stetson hung by a chin lanyard behind her shoulder blades.

"I'll talk fast, Ranger Hatfield. I'm the fianceé of Melvin Benson, sheriff of Frontera County, whose headquarters are in the famous tombstone calaboose at Wagon Gap. I've often heard him talk about you—perhaps you know him."

Hatfield said, "By reputation, if not personally. Go on, Nelsie."

"We got a telegram the first of the week about the holdup on the Overland Railroad," the girl went on. "The moment Mel learned that Todd Zero was behind that outrage, and that the masked gang was known to be heading into West Texas on their way to the border, he said, 'The way to dab our loop on that gang if owl-hoot riders is to guard every waterhole between them and the Mexican border. They can't travel without water. If they head our way, sooner or later we'll have 'em. We'll bait our man traps with the surest lure of all—sweet water.'"

Hatfield nodded approval. This sheriff Mel Benson had used the same line of reasoning which had guided Jim and Chuck Callis to the waterhole here at the Rincon today—the border-bound fugitives couldn't survive without visiting water-holes.

"So," Nelsie went on swiftly, "Mel sent scouts out to cover the only three water-holes in his territory. He assigned me to wait at the Rincon Seep, because I nee-

dled him into it, and he was pretty sure that no one outside of Wagon Gap even knew this old Indian *rancheria* existed."

Hatfield commented drily, "It wasn't too smart, hiding out in this cave, was it?"

Nelsiet DeHaven shrugged in the darkness. "I'll admit I was a little nervous when I realized that Todd Zero was going to make camp in here instead of riding on after watering his horses. I was hiding back in the shadows when he lighted his campfire. The first thing I saw were those saddlebags—"

"How," cut in the Ranger, "did Sheriff Benson expect you to get word to him if Zero's wild bunch did show up?"

"By smoke signal or a heliograph mirror, daytimes, or a signal fire up on Comanche Peak if by night. You see, Mel's waiting at his tombstone calaboose in town, watching for signals from the different waterholes, with a posse all set to ride."

New hope leaped inside Hatfield. "You sent your signal, maybe—before you got trapped inside here?"

"No," the girl admitted. "You see, I overheard them making their plans for the other five to ride to Wagon Gap while Todd Zero remained here, guarding the loot. Splitting up that way, I decided the best thing to do would be to wait a bit. The gang was due back here at one o'clock in the morning, aiming to spend tomorrow resting their horses for the last dash across the desert to the border. And also to escape a storm that's moving out way. If you've ever been through a summer norther in this end of Texas—"

"I have," Hatfield said, and went on to explain how he also had been scouting the outlaws from the rimrock, at dusk.

"Anyway," Nelsie continued, "your showing up, holding a gun on Todd Zero, blew my plans sky-high. I didn't know for sure you were a Texas Ranger until I saw you take your badge out of your boot lining."

"You were spying on me all that time?"

"Sure. I saw you handcuff Zero, but I didn't dare reveal myself until I was sure of what I was up against. At that time I had no way to knowing but what you were another outlaw, maybe one of Zero's own gang fixing to mutiny. I had to be sure."

They both jumped nervously as a gunshot drove a bullet into the cavern entrance.

"Malloy's getting impatient," Hatfield said. "Nelsie, while I'm delighted to have your company, under ordinary circumstances, I'm forced to tell you that both of us may not live to get out of this trap. Those men out there are fully capable of building a brush fire and smothering our oxygen supply, even if it means murdering their boss."

Nelsie's laughter came clear and sweet as a bell's tinkle.

"I guess it's time to show my hole card," she said cryptically. "Haven't you felt the air currents blowing through the cave, Jim?"

Hatfield stiffened as if he had been slapped. "Why—of course!" he said. "That means the cave has an exit somewhere."

"An exit I've known about since I was a child, Jim."

His heart slugged with excitement. "You know the way out—"

The girl reached out to grip his hand, as if to reassure him that all this was not a hallucination.

"I doubt if there is anyone else in Frontera County who knows his way through that maze of underground passages, Jim."

Hatfield's heart was pounding like a rabbit's. The "doomed" feeling, the panicky feeling that he didn't have a chance at survival, had completely left him now.

"How long will it take to reach open air again?"

"Twenty minutes at the most. Some of the passages are so narrow we'll have to crawl."

"Where," Hatfield wanted to know, "is the exit hole?"

"On the north side of the ridge, at the box end of a barranca they call Armadillo Gulch. I've got a horse picketed in the brush out there."

Hatfield's agile mind was already racing

ahead, making plans.

"How does this sound, then," the Lone Wolf proposed. "You tote the saddlebags of loot, I'll carry Todd Zero. When we get outside, I'll double around and pick up my own horse, stashed in the brush on the opposite side of the Rincon. Then—"

"The two of us would have the whole gang bottled up!" the girl cried eagerly. "You could guard one exit from the Rincon and I the other one, and while those hoodlums up there are busy piling up their brush I could light my signal fire to bring Mel and his posse over from Wagon Gap."

Before Hatfield could answer, Badger Malloy's bull-throated roar reached their ears:

"All right, Ranger, what's the answer? Are you sending Zero out with the dinero, or do I signal the boys to start piling up the brush to smoke you out?"

Hatfield moved over to the bend in the cavern entrance.

Cupping hands to lips, he sent his defiant answer back to the outlaws waiting under the Rincon walls:

"Go ahead and start piling brush, Malloy. We're standing pat."

CHAPTER VIII

"Tombstone Calaboose"

THE Lone Wolf ducked back into the main cavern in time to see the amazing Nelsie DeHaven lighting a pitch-pine torch—obviously brought from the outside—from the coals of Todd Zero's cookfire. She already had slung the plump leather bags of bandit loot over one shoulder.

Hatfield went over to where he had left Zero lying on his bedroll. The outlaw was sitting up, rubbing his sore head and cursing softly to himself.

"How about taking off these irons, Hatfield?" Zero asked, and then, staring past his captor, he spotted Nelsie with her flaming torch. "What the hell? A girl? Where'd she come from? Is that a tin star she's wearing?"

Ignoring the flood of questions, Hatfield said, "The handcuffs stay. We're getting out of here before Malloy burns us out."

Shackled, Todd Zero wouldn't be so apt to try to make a getaway when they were back in the labyrinth of underground passages leading to Armadillo Gulch, Hatfield figured.

"How about this pack horse?" the girl asked compassionately. "It seems cruel to leave it in here to be smothered to death."

Hatfield hurried over to the animal and slipped off its head stall. Slapping it on the rump with his hat, he sent the horse out the elbow-bend of the cavern entrance.

Almost at once there was an ear-riving thunder of gunshots from the Rincon, and the drumming of hoofbeats ended with ghastly suddenness.

"Trigger-happy fools," the girl deputy groaned. "Shooting at anything they see coming out. They thought you were trying to run for it, most likely."

Hatfield headed back to where Todd Zero was pulling himself shakily to his feet. In the shuttering glare of torchlight, the boss outlaw of the Texas border looked especially malevolent as he peered stupidly about, trying to regain his wits and steady his blurred equilibrium.

"Let's go," Hatfield ordered. "Lead the way, Nelsie."

Nelsie, holding the smoking pitch-pine torch aloft, headed off into the bewildering forest of stalagmites and stalactites and odd, elephant-ear-shaped limestone formations. There was no visible trail that that Jim Hatfield could see, threading the labyrinth of those limestone columns and curtains, but Nelsie DeHaven moved unerringly into the dizzy maze.

"What's goin' on?" Todd Zero inquired thickly. "And who's she?"

Hatfield shoved him forward. "Just follow the torch. Your *buscadors* are getting set to burn us out of here, Zero."

The news did not appear to make any impression on the dazed outlaw. Weaving unsteadily, he tried to follow the girl with the smoking torch, colliding painfully with

granite-hard stalagmites before Hatfield finally took him by the arm to help him along, convinced that he was not feigning his half-stupor.

The ghostly voices of Malloy and the other outlaws reached the ears of the escaping trio, growing more and more dim as they threaded their way deeper into the twisting, lifting, falling passage in the heart of the mountain.

The walls closed in; some of them glinted with the wet shine of seeping water, and the torch in Nelsie's hand began to sizzle and cast off jets of steam as drops of moisture fell on the flame. In places the ceiling of the passage lowered, so that they had to crawl on all fours.

Todd Zero gave them no trouble. He obeyed orders, slogging along behind the girl.

"Those saddlebags too heavy?" Hatfield called up ahead to their guide. "I can tote 'em and ride herd on Zero, too."

Her panting answer sounded eerie in the compressed darkness, only dimly relieved by the guttering pineknot: "I can manage. It isn't far now, we're past halfway."

Dust and bat guano choked their nostrils. Hatfield, taking the stirred-up filth and residue kicked up by Zero and the girl, tied his bandanna neckpiece over his nose. He kept a Colt .45 handy every time they passed a side entrance to a cave, knowing that Todd Zero could easily lose himself forever in this limestone formation that was as peppered with tiny cavities as the inside of a loaf of bread.

A final crawl through what was little more than an animal's burrow and Nelsie DeHaven was extinguishing the pitch-pine stick in the guano underfoot. Ahead of them a brush-screened rectangle of moonlight showed. They had reached the secret exit to the Rincon's old Indian dwelling.

From behind came the funneled, hollow-sounding noise of men's voices and crackling brush. Malloy and Highpockets and the others were carrying out their threat to asphyxiate every living thing in the cavern. It brought a grin to Hatfield's lips, visualizing Zero's men guarding an empty cave, waiting for the jaws of a law trap to close around the Rincon.

Moments later they were crawling through a thicket of spiny tornillo and bulltongue cactus to find themselves under the night sky. East and west lifted the steep, brushy slopes of Armadillo Gulch; at their backs, the Rincon's ridge. To the north and west was a moonlit vista of Texas terrain, with the ugly-looking dust clouds racked almost to the zenith and much closer than they had been at dusk, closer by fifty miles.

"The storm is moving our way," Tod Zero said nervously. "I hope we aren't caught out in it. This country is smack in the middle of the cyclone streak the Conquistadores called *El Rastro del Tornado,* the Tornado Trail. The very dirt under our feet was dumped here from Kansas and Nebraska by those twisters."

A few yards away Nelsie DeHaven's horse whickered anxiously. The feel of the storm seemed to pervade the air.

A TALL TEXAS TALE

COURT CAPER

AS THE trial in an assault-and-battery case got under way, an old Texas rancher was called to the stand.

"Please tell the court just how far from the parties you were when this alleged assault took place," said the attorney for the defense.

"Ten feet, nine inches and a quarter," drawled the rancher.

"How can you be so exact?" asked the attorney excitedly.

"Well," drawled the Texan. "I kind of reckoned some dam' fool would ask me, so I took out my rule and measured it."

—Darrel James

"Jim," Nelsie said, "I'll ride herd on the prisoner while you circle around for your horse. Then we can set up our blockade and send our signals to Mel over in Wagon Gap."

Nelsie, apparently, had no fears of the gathering tempest.

Hatfield handed her one of Gillespie's gold-plated Colt .45s, since the girl's only weapon up to now was a pearl-handled Bisley .38.

"If Zero makes a false move while I'm gone," Hatfield said, "drop him with his own gun. Show him no more mercy than you would a tarantula in your bedroll, understand? He'll try to soft-talk you. He's dangerous and he's slippery—as the chief warden at San Castro penitentiary knows only too well. So take no chances."

As an afterthought, he took the money-laden saddlebags off the girl's shoulder and then set off down the gulch, faced with the job of making a complete circle of the Rincon in order to bring Goldy back.

HALF an hour later, the Ranger was back—with the news that he had had a look from the south rimrock to see how Malloy's plans were progressing.

"They've got a pile of brush as tall as a haystack heaped up on the ledge in front of that cave." Hatfield chuckled. "But they're busy arguing now whether they dare light such a fire at night, for fear of attracting attention in Wagon Gap."

The girl, who had saddled her horse while maintaining a gun guard on Todd Zero, commented wearily, "They've got a point there. A rosy glow over the Rincon would have brought a sheriff's posse *pronto prontito*, if they only knew it."

Hatfield went on, "Malloy wants to hold out until the sandstorm hits, then lighting the fire. So I've decided, Nelsie, to play it safe. We'll hustle Todd Zero over to Mel Benson's jail in Wagon Gap, and get rid of the responsibility of the bandido plunder—and then get back to the Rincon with enough manpower to make sure of picking up Zero's wild bunch."

The Ranger's decision to postpone a showdown here at the Rincon seemed to disappoint the girl's sense of adventure, but she could not deny that it was practical. Malloy, Highpockets, and the other two desperadoes were small fry, as compared to the big fish they had already captured. And getting that half-million in paper money locked up safely in the vaults of the bank in Wagon Gap was another thing to be considered.

At the lower end of Armadillo Gulch, where Hatfield had left Goldy, he helped Zero aboard the bird sorrel and swung up behind the cantle. It was only a two-hour ride to town, and Goldy could carry double that far.

With Nelsie astride her blue roan and leading the way, they threaded the game trails which joined up with the main canyon road to Wagon Gap, the ancient emigrant route which Zero's five henchmen had been following a few hours ago.

Two miles down the canyon, where it curved westward around the north end of the vast dry lake, they surprised coyotes quarreling over something hidden in the shadows at the base of the south cutbank.

Jimy Hatfield, dismounting long enough to investigate, used the excuse of handing Goldy's reins to Nelsie to keep her from walking over to check on the carrion the coyotes had found. When he came back, his face was bleached of color.

"Charles Callis—or what's left of him," he said with a shudder. "A rookie who wanted to be a Ranger, but didn't want to earn his star the slow, hard way. He wanted his glory quick, and tackled Zero's hard cases single-handed. I'd sent him out to bring Sheriff Benson's posse over to the Rincon."

They hurried on. Callis would never have made a Ranger, but it was still horrifying, the fate that had overtaken the rash young Texan.

Dawn was breaking when they entered the outskirts of Wagon Gap, a cluster of false fronts and unpainted shacks and scattered adobes on the west rim of the dry lake. On the north edge of town was a granite quarry which eastern capitalists had invested a fortune in shortly after the

Civil War, seeking to commercialize on one of the finest deposist of pink granite in America, much sought-after by monument makers. But the promised railroad from Marfa never arrived, and tombstones were much too bulky to ship economically by freight wagon.

Thus Wagon Gap's quarry industry had gone bankrupt. But the hundreds of carved and polished gravestones, waiting to be loaded on freight cars which would never arrive, had been put to a novel use. When a cyclone in '72 had destroyed the Frontera County jail, the enterprising citizens of Wagon Gap had built a new one entirely out of polished tombstones, as if they had been cheap as brick.

Now Hatfield found himself reining Goldy to a halt in front of the fabulous Thombstone Calaboose for the first time. Todd Zero was also having that experience, but from an exactly opposite point of view.

Built perfectly square and unadorned by cornices, gables, turrets or battlements, the tombstone walls raised fifteen feet to the eaves of the wooden roof which surmounted the unique bastille. The polished pink granite presented a sun-dazzling face to the eyes, its east wall broken only by a door marked, SHERIFF'S OFFICE.

The approaching storm had not yet made itself felt here in town, but was only twenty miles off by now. Hatfield noticed that Nelsie DeHaven was staring off down Wagon Gap's empty street toward the on-racing clouds of dust, betraying anxiety for the first time. Todd Zero was likewise showing his nervousness over the coming storm.

"You bought your way out of a much bigger jail than this, Zero," Jim Hatfield commented as he dismounted and hitched Goldy to the jail tie rack. "Of course, your funds weren't impounded in quite the same manner as now. But at any rate you'll be well sheltered from that storm when she strikes."

Zero stepped down from stirrups and regarded his temporary abode with an outlaw's cold indifference.

"The jail ain't built that'd hold me for long, Hatfield," he said hoarsely, his eyes following Nelsie DeHaven as the girl led her pony over to the rack and made her tie. "Although I'll admit, being penned up behind that many tombstones is enough to make a man superstitious."

Hatfield unbuckled the bulging *alforja* pouches from behind his cantle. He knew what Zero was thinking. He still had to be transported overland from Wagon Gap to the nearest railroad station, at Marfa, for transfer to the State Prison at San Castro on the Brazos. A lot could happen to a prisoner, covering that many miles.

The jail door opened and a tall, haggard-faced young Texan in a red shirt, chocolate-brown chaps and fancy Justin cowboots stood there, head ducking to clear a six-foot lintel across which was engraved "Rest in Peace." This sentiment, Hatfield and Zero noticed, was repeated here and there on the gleaming granite surface of the building, along with such sentiments as "Mother Dear," "Gone to His Reward," "Asleep with the Angels," and other stock epitaphs in a monument carver's catalogue.

Even before he spotted the sheriff's badge on the man's Stetson brim, Jim Hatfield knew they were being greeted by Wagon Gap's lawman, Mel Benson. Before the two men had time to get a good look at each other, the girl with the deputy sheriff's badge had run over to throw her arms around Benson's neck and kissed him.

TODD ZERO, wanting nothing so much as a good rest on whatever bunk the Tombstone Calaboose had to offer, ducked under the chewed hitchrack fronting the jail and, with Jim Hatfield at his heels, strolled over to the doorway.

"Like blazes, the Lone Wolf himself." Young Mel Benson was gasping as Hatfield and his prisoner drew within earshot. "My gosh, Nelsie, I've looked forward to meeting Hatfield for years!"

Nelsie DeHaven said proudly, "Jim, this is the man I plan to marry before the summer is over—Sheriff Mel Benson. Mel, shake hands with Jim Hatfield. And I'll

let him tell you who we brought in this morning."

Mel Benson's handshake was somewhat anticlimatic, for the gray-eyed, roan-haired young sheriff of Frontera County had just had his first look at the Ranger's companion.

"This isn't *Todd Zero?"* the Wagon Gap sheriff exclaimed incredulously. "But it has to be—those gold-plated guns, the black and white holsters—"

A bitter grin broke the taut fixture of the famous owlhooter's predatory mouth. "The long-lost Gillespie Guns are back in Ranger hands, Sheriff," Zero said drily. "I am about to become the most distinguished celebrity who ever signed the register at your equally distinguished jail."

The boyish wonderment faded from Mel Benson's eyes. He might be a hero worshiper where Jim Hatfield was concerned, but the hot anger that stained his cheeks left Zero in no doubt as to the sheriff's opinion of egotistical gunhawks.

"As far as I'm concerned, Zero, you're a hydrophoby skunk and I'll be glad to get the stink of you out of my jail." He looked away to study the tooled-leather saddlebags Hatfield had slung over his shoulder. "Those *alforjas* wouldn't be loaded with that California Flyer loot, would they, Jim?"

The Lone Wolf nodded. "Soon as you get our distinguished celebrity behind bars, Mel, I'd be obliged if we could get these pouches put away in the county vaults. "Toting around half a million in negotiable paper makes a man's nerves jump."

Mel Benson reached out to take Todd Zero's arm. "Into the snake pit, Zero!" the sheriff snapped. "If this day's the scorcher yesterday was, you'll think you're already in hell, inside this jail of mine. Those tombstone walls don't shed heat, they soak it up."

Hatfield followed the sheriff inside. Most of the tombstones had been placed so that their fancy carvings and epitaphs, some containing the names of actual customers who had never received delivery on their merchandise before the quarry went broke, were legible from the inside of the building.

Here and there, Hatfield noticed, the north and south walls of the jail had small ventilator openings, heavily barred with iron lattice work. In spite of himself, the Lone Wolf shuddered. The place was like the inside of a mausoleum; the various cell cages reminded him of burial vaults.

The eerieness of the Wagon Gap jail was beginning to show on Todd Zero's face as Hatfield unlocked the handcuffs and Mel Benson escorted his most important prisoner of all time into the cell nearest the jail office.

"What became of the five men riding with Zero?" Benson asked, joining Hatfield and his fiancée out in the office after double-locking Zero's cell. "I'm assuming you caught up with Zero out at Rincon Seep, seeing as how my girl rode back to town with you."

Hatfield grinned wearily. Through the open door of the jail he could see the sun poised like a white-hot globe over the blunt peaks which identified the location of the Rincon. A banner of smoke lifted from that amphitheater in the hills across the dry lake; that was proof Badger Malloy had decided to risk lighting his fire in daylight.

"It's a long story, one that Nelsie can tell you later, sheriff," the Lone Wolf said, "since she gets the lion's share of the credit for capturing Todd Zero and recovering that loot. The five members of Zero's gang are waiting for us over at Rincon Seep."

"I got my posse waiting over at the Lakeview Hotel, ready to ride on a moment's notice, Jim!" Benson exclaimed. "I guess Nelsie explained my scheme about guarding the county waterholes."

Hatfield headed out the door. "There are two things to do first, Mel," he said. "First off, I've got to have a snack of breakfast, otherwise I won't last to ride back to the Rincon. Second, where are we going to put these saddlebags?"

Benson gestured across the street from the Tombstone Calaboose to a red brick building bearing a faded sign on

its false front, WEST TEXAS BANK & TRUST, EST. 1871.

"Best vault in town is the bank's—the recorder's safe at the courthouse, and mine at the jail office, are tin cans," Mel Benson said. "Nelsie, you go roust out Farley Storke, the cashier, so's he can open his vault and give us a receipt for that train robbery loot. Jim, I'll join you in ten minutes over at the Overland Café yonder. I got to go let my possemen know we're hitting the trail for Rincon Seep inside of the hour."

Hatfield pocketed the handcuffs he had just taken off Todd Zero's wrists. A gust of wind drove a tumblewood against his legs, reminding him of the grim weather in prospect.

"You know the signs beter than I do, Sheriff," Hatfield said, "but I'm wondering—should we cross the dry lake on horseback with that cyclone closing in on us?"

Mel Benson, despite the weariness of a night without sleep, gave a confident laugh.

"That storm's swingin' north, I been watchin 'er since it got daylight," he said. "It'll miss us by twenty miles."

CHAPTER IX

The Terrible Funnel

THEY were mid-way across the sun-checkered, alkali-crusted whiteness of the dry lake's bed an hour later: Hatfield and Sheriff Mel Benson, and three deputized posse riders.

The posse was short ten men. At the showdown, it hadn't been fear of a gunfight over at the Rincon Seep which had cut Benson's posse from thirteen to three, but rather a panicky dread of being caught in the middle of a Texas sandstorm which, at this time of year and in this particular area, occasionally turned into a full-fledged "twister" tornado.

Nelsie DeHaven was not with them, at her sheriff fiancé's orders. She had spent time enough, scouting the Seep, young Benson had insisted. Besides, an official deputy sheriff was needed at the Tombstone Calaboose to ride herd on Todd Zero.

Zero's train robbery loot was no longer Hatfield's responsibility. He had seen it turned over to Farley Storke, cashier of the West Texas Bank & Trust, and deposited for safe keeping in the bank's vault. Hatfield had a receipt to prove it, and the half million in currency would remain in Wagon Gap's bank until Uncle Sam came to collect it.

Just after finishing breakfast, Hatfield had tarried long enough to dispatch a coded telegram to Captain Bill McDowell, chief of Rangers at Austin, notifying his superior that Todd Zero was in custody, pending further orders, and Sergeant Gillespie's stolen guns—the gold-plated Peacemaker .45s—were back in Ranger hands, locked up in Sheriff Benson's desk in the Tombstone Calaboose office.

It was one of the happiest messages Hatfield had ever put on the wire in the years he had worn the Texas Ranger badge. He had purposely refrained from letting Roaring Bill McDowell, as he was called throughout Texas, know the tragic ending of Chuck Callis's aspiring rookie career.

Fagged out physically, Jim Hatfield was dozing in the saddle, letting the possemen lead the way toward Rincon Seep, when a sharp yell from Mel Benson roused him. He jerked erect in saddle, hands going automatically toward gun-stocks, his first reaction being that they had sighted Badger Malloy's outlaw gang.

Instead, he found Benson and his three possmen facing their horses westward, toward Wagon Gap.

A gasp of sheer horror broke from Jim Hatfield's lips as he caught sight of the great black funnel-shaped appendage which the storm cloud appeared to be dragging across the Texas landscape, on past Wagon Gap.

Within the past few minutes, the character of the storm had changed from a driving gale, scouring sand and dust off the dry Texas terrain, into the deadly circle of a true tornado.

Fear was a chill sliding down Jim Hatfield's backbone, a tremor sweeping the big golden stallion under his saddle, a sob of anguish choking from Sheriff Benson.

The great writhing, wormlike vortex of the cyclone's cloud towered a mile above the prairie. The whirling hurricane-velocity winds were creating a vacuum in the "eye" of the storm, sucking into the funnel every movable thing from the erratic path it took across the Texas landscape: trees, weeds, snakes, fence posts, jackrabbits—a churning conglomeration of loose debris.

Jim Hatfield's lips moved in prayer. He had weathered flash floods and prairie fires that swept across country faster than a horse could gallop. He had been caught in longhorn stampedes and had known the horror of Indian raids. He had bucked nature in her rawest moods, but never had his eyes and ears registered such an appalling and horrific scene as this cataclysm. The suction-pipe trailing under its cloud seemed to lash the helpless land like a whip.

Across the shortening distance came the terrible mounting noise of the tornado. The funnel was jet black now, and seemed to give off a hum like an angry bee, then a swarm of bees, swelling in crescendo until it was a screeching roar like ten thousand waterfalls, like a million stampeding buffaloes.

Faintly against that ear-numbing blast of sound Hatfield heard Benson's yell: "It's going to hit town dead center! Thank God they got a community storm cellar under the old blockhouse from the Injun fighting days."

One of the possemen screamed shrilly: "I got a wife and three kids back there—I got to get to 'em!"

Horror struck Hatfield as he saw the poose suddenly swing their horses and spur off across the dry lakebed toward the doomed town, their reason over-ruled by their concern about loved ones. If the tornado's malignant funnel did sweep across the town, Wagon Gap would be rubbed out of existance like a pencil mark. He doubted if he would see Benson's posse afterwards. A tornado as violent as this one could even snatch up horses and riders like dry leaves and carry them miles, so the stories ran . . . .

FROZEN in pure horror, all thought of the Rincon Seep man-hunt driven from his mind, the Lone Wolf Ranger watched helplessly as the tornado's funnel hit the outskirts of Wagon Gap, lifting a great geyser of pink granite dust out of the old quarry.

A warehouse disintegrated before Hatfield's stunned gaze, sheetiron roof and board walls being sucked up into the spinning serpentine funnel, as if the building had been fabricated of tissue. Sunlight glinted on the spinning metal fragments inside that malignant, undulating coil.

Like something seen in a nightmare, Jim Hatfield saw Wagon Gap die. He saw the courthouse waver, bow, buckle and simply disappear. He saw the dipping funnel skip over a row of saloons and decapitate the steeple from an ancient Spanish chapel. And then swing back to disintegrate the saloons.

"The Tombstone Calaboose—there it goes."

Hatfield yelled the words just as the giant whirlwind sucked the wooden roof from the shining stone-walled building where Todd Zero was a prisoner, as easily as lifting a lid from a box. Five hundred feet in the air the jail roof flew to bits.

Dust was beginning to close in, obscuring Hatfield's view of the wrecked cowtown. He saw rows of smaller houses topple like dominos; he saw a huge haystack lifted a thousand feet in air before it flew apart like a bomb.

And then the tornado's funnel, making a snakelike pattern of S-shaped streaks of destruction as its tip raised and lowered from the earth's surface, seemed to catch sight of Jim Hatfield and his horse, alone out there in the middle of the lakebed, and head toward them at express train speed.

Hatfield swung Goldy around in a circle, his senses giving way, for brief

seconds, to the blind confusion that stampeding animals display when they run headlong over a cliff or into a blazing building.

Then his iron self-control got the better of his instincts and he realized the futility of trying to out-race the rampaging vortex of a major storm. If he and Goldy got caught by that lashing suction funnel they would be destroyed, that was all.

He turned the sorrel toward the folded hills surrounding the Rincon, hoping to reach shelter a mile away. All about him, debris was beginning to rain down from the sky as the storm cloud, spinning like a monstrous top, hurled loose some of its grisly freight by centrifugal force. But it was heading away to the north!

A wagon wheel sailed down from the zenith like a thrown saucer and bounced when it hit the lake bed, knocking up a great slanting geyser of white soda and alkali which the wind whisked away like smoke. Something that had been the signboard of a gambling hall over in Wagon Gap streaked overhead, casting a shadow over horse and rider like that of a hurtling buzzard.

And then Hatfield found himself pulling Goldy to a halt. Straight ahead of him, at the far edge of the dry lake and on a bee-line to the Rincon, four riders had halted to watch the death of a town.

Hatfield didn't need the binoculars to identify those men. Highpockets and Badger Malloy and their two Zero henchmen. They must have discovered that their prey had flown the coop at the Rincon Seep cave and were heading for town when the storm hit.

Something whistled past Hatfield's ear, close enough to hear above the diminishing roar of the tornado. A bullet! Todd Zero's men had him at their mercy, a helpless target in the wide open spaces of the dry lakebed, and were opening fire with their long-range carbines.

The Lone Wolf Ranger snaked his own Winchester from saddle boot. Before he could jack a shell into the breech to return the outlaws' fire, the weapon was knocked from his hands by the slanting blow of a bullet.

Not until darkness moved across his vision, deeper than the darkness of the retreating storm did Jim Hatfield realize that the rifle slug, ricocheting off his own carbine, had stuck him low on the right side of the chest.

Like a man caught in a bad dream, he looked down to see the blood beginning to stain his shirt from the under side. He reached a hand that had been lacerated by the trigger guard of his own rifle, to feel under his shirt. When he pulled his hand out the fingers dripped red . . .

Got to stick with Goldy—or I'm a goner, he thought.

He knew bullets were slanting in, bracketing him and the stallion, but he could not find the strength to spur Goldy into flight. Working purely by instinct, the Lone Wolf tugged his handcuffs from his hip pocket and notched one iron bracelet around his left wrist, the other to the stubby Brazos horn of his saddle.

The Ranger was not aware of passing out, or his wounded chest slumping against the swellfork pommel, painting it crimson. He was not aware of Goldy breaking into a gallop under him, heading straight in the direction of the four riflemen at the lakebed's rim.

CHAPTER X

Luck of the Devil

IT TOOK Tod Zero the better part of an hour to extricate himself from the matchwood tangle of splintered timbers which had fallen across the top of his jail cell when the twister had deroofed the Tombstone Calaboose.

Miraculously, he was uninjured except for minor bruises; the iron-barred walls of his cage had kept the callapsing joists overhead from crushing him against the granite floor. Todd Zero felt like the last man in the world. He was all alone, insofar as he knew, in a void of silence. The silence had a dreadful, almost solid quality about it, after the tornado had roared on its way to dissipate its incalculable forces

in the empty reaches of the Llano Estecado.

The outlaw was far too aware of the enormity of his own sinful past to believe that God had been merciful in sparing him when the worst tornado in half a century struck Wagon Gap. Rather, Zero attributed the miracle of his survival to his own diabolical brand of luck—the luck of the devil himself.

Using splintered timber for levers and pry bars, Todd Zero was finally able to use the wreckage itself as a ladder to reach the top of the cell. Sunlight streamed into the Tombstone Calaboose, unimpeded by even the skeleton framework of a roof. The jail, solid as Gibralter, was probably the only thing left in the town.

Climbing down the outside of the bars, Zero found himself wondering what had happened to Nelsie DeHaven, the hauntingly beautiful girl who wore that absurd law badge on her shirt front. He knew she had left the jail shortly before the twister hit; he had heard her screaming to pedestrains to head for the Community Storm Cellar under the old blockhouse.

Picking his way over the jumbled debris in the cellblock, Zero made his way out into the office. It was a shambles. The street door had been jerked off its hinges by the suction of the tornado, giving him a view of the vacant street outside, the hardpan swept entirely clean of topsoil. Mel Benson's office safe stood as usual in the corner, but his rolltop desk had been turned on its side and all the reward posters—including one of himself, Zero recalled—had been stripped off the wall bulletin board.

Grinning confidentally, Todd Zero pulled at the top drawer of the overturned desk. Out fell two gold-plated Colt .45s and their black-and-white holsters and ammunition belts. Gillespie's famous presentation six-shooters, which Jim Hatfield had left here for safekeeping.

Todd Zero buckled on the guns. It was more of the devil's luck that seemed to have guided and directed him during all the years of his hell-bent career.

He checked the cylinders to make sure the Texas Ranger hadn't unloaded the guns. Not that he expected to need those .45s, here in Wagon Gap at least. It was very possible, he told himself, that he was the only living human being in this end of Frontera County.

Zero made his way out under the blistering sun. The sky was enamel-blue, swept clean by the passing storm. He looked out on a scene of total desolation. Piles of kindlingwood and fractured brick showed where stores and the courthouse and saloons and warehouses had stood a scant two hours ago. Junk lumber, dead horses, wrecked wagons, a shattered windmill tank, an undertaker's hearse upside down atop a low brick building down the street—everywhere Zero saw testimony to the devastating power of the wind-eddy that had brushed this town off the map.

He heard a horse whicker somewhere and the sound guided him to a brick livery barn, stripped of its roof, which was almost buried from view under what had been the Frontera County courthouse. The horse-sounds on the other side of those solid walls reassured Todd Zero. He would not have to walk from here to the safety of the Mexican border, then. . . .

He turned a corner, and dropped a hand to gun butt. A dazed man in a tattered black coat was just emerging from the blownout window of another brick building which remained standing after the tornado's passage. A sand-scoured sign on the facade of the ruined building identified it as the West Texas Bank & Trust. The name struck a bell in Zero's memory. That was where Ranger Jim Hatfield planned to stow the California Flyer booty for safekeeping. . .

Zero made his way over mounds of broken brick and splintered wood to reach the man's side. He was bleeding from a cut forehead and he was still wearing the black sateen sleeve guards and green celluloid eyeshade of a bank teller.

"Howdy," Todd Zero greeted the oldster. "Far as I can tell, you and me are the only survivors left to talk it over, amigo."

The man looked at Zero as if unable to focus his eyes properly.

"You're that Texas Ranger who gave Farley Storke those saddle bags to put in the vault, just before the storm hit, ain't you?"

Before Zero could say anything, the man went on in his irrational mumble, "Hard telling if Mr. Storke made it to the storm cellar in time. I'm glad I took my chances in the bank."

Zero reached out to grip the man's arm. "If Farley Storke was killed," he said harshly, "how can I get that money out of the bank safe?"

The old man's lips crinkled in a childish smile. "I'm the assistant cashier," he said. "I know the combination."

TODD ZERO'S heart started to slug his ribs. "Let's get it opened, that vault of yours. I'm responsible for that dinero."

The old man shook his head. He gestured vaguely down the side street, toward the pile of wreckage which was the ruins of Wagon Gap's old blockhouse, a memento of the Indian wars.

"I ought to find out how the folks are making out down in the storm cellar. Looks from here like the blockhouse fell in on their cellar entrance. Could be the whole town's trapped underground, waiting for help."

Zero was already helping the oldster pick his way over the debris toward the sagging doorway of the bank lobby. He had to work fast, while this old man's brain was still confused by the recent ordeal. He wondered if the old timer had been knocked out during the past hour since the storm had died out.

"You get the bank vault opened," Zero said gently, as they made their way into the hollow shell of the bank building, "and then I'll help clear the storm cellar door. What's your name, old timer?"

"Ray Waite. I've worked at this bank since seventy-eight."

Waite was guiding Todd Zero over to where the squat black shape of a fireproof safe sat unharmed under a matchstick jumble of wood and plaster. It was but the work of moments for Zero to free the valut so that Waite could kneel before the combination dial.

Zero could tell that the old man was hardly aware of what he was doing, but the combination of the safe, a secret which had locked in his brain for many years most likely, came automatically to the withered, arthritic hands.

Within moments, Ray Waite was pulling open the thick laminated iron door of the vault. Sunlight, pouring in through the roofless building, gleamed on the tooled-leather saddlebags which banker Farley Storke had carefully stowed on a metal shelf of the vault this morning.

Zero thrust old man Waite to one side and reached in to haul out the saddlebags. He unbuckled a flap and checked the contents, to make sure the crisp packets of new currency were still intact. Then, slinging the *alforjas* over his shoulder, Todd Zero turned to Waite. The old banker was mumbling, "Thank heavens I had sense enough to put the books in the vault. They would of been scattered from here to Kansas if I hadn't."

That happy thought was filling Waite's brain when Todd Zero's down-clubbing sixgun barrel caved in his skull and dumped the cowtown banker into eternity, seconds afterward.

"This was your last day, old man," Zero said, wiping a smear of blood off the gold-plated gunbarrel before holstering the weapon. "Maybe you thought you'd tricked Old Man Fate, when the storm passed you by. But it was writ in the book, that this was your last day on earth."

He looked down at the crumpled old man, at the beatific smile on Waite's lips, as if death had been welcome after the horrors this morning had brought forth.

"A man can't beat his luck," Todd Zero said, "any more than I could have left this town without Gillespie's guns in my holsters—or these bags of dinero in my keeping."

Todd Zero worked his way through the mountains of debris on the bank floor and, taking the same window Ray Waite had used, climbed back out onto the street.

He was whistling a nameless tune to

himself as he headed in the general direction of the county barn, where he had heard the horses. Before Frontera County had recovered from the effects of the torna, he would be safe in Old Mexico.

He thought, regretfully, of the canvas sacks of gold specie he had glimpsed inside the bank safe, but gold weighed too much. Besides, he told himself, half a million was loot enough, especially when he didn't have to share it with his men.

"Why should I?" he asked himself, reasoning it out. "If they show up in Wagon Gap, they'll figger the tornado sucked me out of the Tombstone Calaboose when it took off the roof. Mine won't be the only body that'll never turn up. It'll be anybody's guess who killed old Waite and left the bank vault wide open."

He broke off, halting stockstill as he caught sight of two men, working with broken timbers like crowbars, a block up the street in the shadow of the old blockhouse.

One he recognized as Mel Benson, the sheriff, one arm in a sling. The other man seemed to be talking to someone down under the pile of wreckage.

And then Todd Zero knew the truth. Benson was trying to clear the debris off the door of the community storm cellar in the basement of the blockhouse. Benson, so far as Todd Zero knew, had left this morning before the storm struck, for Rincon Seep. In Ranger Jim Hatfield's company. . . .

Zero hurried around the corner, crossed the storm-scoured emptiness of what had been the Wagon Gap courthouse plaza, and came thus to the county stables. The palmettos which had lined the town square had been stripped of their fronds by the storm's furry and stood naked as plucked chickens in the sunlight.

TOTING the saddlebags on one shoulder, Todd Zero rounded the corner of the stable. Through a broken window he caught sight of the rows of horses, apparantly uninjured, standing in their stalls.

He was heading toward the open archway of the county barn when four men walked out into the sunlight to stand facing him. Highpockets, Badger Malloy, the two *mestizos*. Seeing them, Todd Zero halted stockstill, staring as if he was seeing ghosts.

"Fancy meeting you here, boss," Badger Malloy chuckled, tossing a cigarette to one side and hitching his belts. "How are you?"

Zero gulped audibly. "I was just fixing to get a horse and ride over to Rincon Seep after you. How'd you get here?"

Highpockets said in a strange voice, "We didn't smoke anybody out of that Indian cave last night, boss, so we investigated. Damned if it wasn't empty. Had a back door we didn't know about. We knew if Hatfield had escaped, he'd taken you with him. *And* the money."

Todd Zero licked his mouth nervously. Something was wrong. He didn't like the way the boys were staring at him. And why hadn't they mentioned the saddlebags? They knew what was inside them. Why weren't they curious as to how he still had them?

"We saw the tornado hit the town," one of the *mestizos* said. "And the Lone Wolf Ranger riding back toward the Rincon. He was a brave one, that Señor Hatfield, coming out after us alone, no?"

Terror was building up in Todd Zero. "How long have you been here?" he asked hollowly.

Badger Malloy said, "Just got in. Unsaddled our broncs in the barn. We were fixing to saddle fresh mounts when Highpockets saw you heading our way. We figgered you were dead, boss, when we didn't find you inside that tombstone jail."

Todd Zero swallowed again. "We got to hit the trail, boys, before Sheriff Benson opens the door of that community storm cellar. We got to make tracks for Mexico before the whole confounded population of the town comes pouring out into the daylight, like ants out of a tromped-on anthill."

He broke off, remembering something the *mestizo* had just said.

"You run into Ranger Hatfield out on the lakebed?"

They nodded, eyes glittering with secret amusement.

Zero looked from face to face. "Well, what happened? Did you bushwhack the mangey star-toting son?"

Badger Malloy's shoulders lifted and fell. "We winged him, we're perty sure of that. But it was long range, and his big stallion was too fast for us. Last we seen of the Lone Wolf, his horse was taking him south, out of sight behind the rolling dust."

Highpockets added confidentally, "I put my glasses on him. I'd bet my last blue chip he was dead, the way he was slumped over the saddle. Looked like his shirt was caught on the horn, to me."

"Otherwise," put in one of the *mestizos*, "he would have fallen off the *caballo*."

Zero forced himself to grin. He reached up and tossed the money-laden saddlebags in the dust at Badger Malloy's feet.

"After we're saddled up on fresh horses and hitting the trail," he said, "I'll tell you how I rescued our boodle, boys. Let's get going. This is a happy reunion, ain't it? Saves me a trip over to Rincon Seep to get you boys."

The four outlaws did not smile. Their hands, Todd Zero saw, were hovering close to gun butts. Finally it was Badger Malloy who spoke. His words reminded Zero of Alvarez's ultimatum:

"Boss, we're splitting up, going our separate ways, here and now. We're divvying up that swag, too. Only you ain't goin' with us, boss. We figger you're bad luck. The devil's own bad luck."

Badger's poised fist made its slapping noise on gunbutt as he finished speaking, but fast as the old gunslammer was, his Colt was only half drawn when one of Sergeant Gillepie's gold-plated .45s bucked and thundered in Todd Zero's fist.

One of the *mestizos* let out a shrill scream and turned toward the stable door at his back, and died with Zero's second shot in the base of his brain.

And then the outlaw they called Highpockets leaped to get behind the slumping corpse that had been Badger Malloy, using that precious split second's respite to get his own Colt out of leather.

Highpockets and the other *mestizo* froze as they found themselves with a point-blank drop on Todd Zero. They had but to trip gunhammers to blast Zero down—but their trigger fingers were paralyzed. And Todd Zero's own guns, one in either hand, had their equal chance to drop his mutinous henchmen—but his own weapons remained silent.

"It's a stand-off, boys," Todd Zero said. "I'll forget what happened. We'll make a three-way split of those greenbacks—and be on our way. How about it?"

Highpockets was looking off past Zero.

"Uh-uh, boss," the lanky outlaw said. "It's too late. Look around behind you."

It was a trick, an old trick, the oldest trick in the gunnie's bag of tricks. But before Todd Zero could say so, he heard the strike of an iron shod hoof on a rock, and the crunching sound of a stick of wood splintering under a horse's weight.

A voice came then, harsh, authoritative: "You two hombres, leave Zero to me—and drop your guns, too."

Highpockets and the surviving *mestizo* dropped their weapons and lifted their arms, something like disappointment showing in their faces.

Even before he turned around, Todd Zero knew Jim Hatfield had escaped the tornado, somehow, and that he was Nemesis, come to write an entry in the last page of Zero's book, just as Zero had gloated about doing to the banker.

Turning, Zero saw Jim Hatfield in the act of dismounting from Goldy's blood-spattered saddle. A handcuff dangled from Hatfield's left wrist, the other bracket having shackled him to the saddle horn, out there on the dry lake. The front of the Ranger's shirt, under the Texas Ranger badge, was black with dried blood from a ricochet wound that was more painful than serious.

Hatfield's face was haggard with pain and fatigue, but the Colt in his right fist was as steady as if it was held in a vise.

"You boys made your mistake not running me down when you had the chance," the Lone Wolf Ranger said bleakly to Zero's henchmen. "And you, Zero, made

a mistake picking up Gillespie's guns again. It was the sun flashing on those gold-plated barrels that drew me over here when I rode in."

Zero made a little sigh. "I wasn't born to hang," he said and lifted his guns and snapped the hammers, to bracket Jim Hatfield with wild lead. Before he could correct his aim, the .45 in the Ranger's fist spoke once, blasting echoes across the ruined town. His bullet sped unerringly to the center of the outlaw's sweat-slick forehead.

Even as the dead man was falling, Hatfield said wearily, "Riding in I saw Sheriff Benson working on the storm cellar door. We'll mosey that way and help 'em."

"Yeah, Hatfield, sure." Highpockets, staring down at Todd Zero's dead shape sprawled crosswise over Malloy's corpse, sounded almost relieved that it was all over. "We'll be glad to help."

The Lone Wolf Ranger walked stiffly over to the dead outlaw and stooped to extricate Sergeant Gillespie's golden six-guns from Zero's lax fingers. He placed them in Goldy's saddle bags, for delivery later to Mrs. Gillespie over in Uvalde, and then he slung the loot-laden saddlebags across the saddle seat. Sooner or later he would learn how Zero had managed to get them out of the ruined bank.

"Okay," he said, gesturing his gun at the two prisoners. "Let's go. The way it looked to me, Sheriff Benson broke an arm during the storm."

But the sheriff had no need of help. When the Ranger and his two plodding outlaws were still half a block away, they saw the first of the town's citizenry come pouring up from the storm cellar which the young sheriff and his posseman assistant had finally managed to get clear of wreckage.

A great thanksgiving flooded through Jim Hatfield as he recognized Nelsie DeHaven, the girl who had saved his life last night at Rincon Seep, running to throw herself into Mel Benson's embrace. He was to learn, later, that the girl had rounded up the town's population of fifty-odd souls before the twister struck, getting them to the storm shelter in time. Except for the banker Todd Zero had murdered after the storm, Wagon Gap had no deaths to mourn.

"This town," Jim Hatfield murmured as he saw Nelsie and the young sheriff running toward him, "will rebuild, and here come two of the kids who'll rebuild it. It takes more than a tornado to rip up a true Texan's roots."

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TWO KINDS OF GUNS

One was a gunman, the other a gunfighter—and broad was the gap between

I HAD this Jim Blade tabbed as a gunman right from the start. He wasn't wearing any hardware the day he rode into Quarro, but he wasn't fooling me. I figured he was heading for the Border, with the law maybe doing a little pushing.

I was sitting in front of my office when he came riding up the street and pulled his big sorrel to a halt.

"Hot day, Marshal," he said.

I let my eyes play over the lean hardness of his body, the arrogant set of his wide shoulders. "The Border's that way," I said, nodding toward the south.

For a moment his gray eyes hardened, then he smiled thinly. "Looks like a quiet little town, Marshal. I think I'll stay a spell." He stepped down from the saddle with a fluid, catlike motion that spelled perfect coordination of his muscles.

His glance was steady as he watched me eyeing his horse. "Nice critter you're got there," I said. "Don't look like he's been ridden too hard."

Those gray eyes of his pinned right on mine. "I had no call to ride him hard, Marshal."

That was his oblique way of telling me there wasn't any posse on the prod for him. He took the chair next to mine and casually rolled a smoke. I watched his quick, nimble fingers and saw the hard calluses along the insides of his thumbs, where the constant pulling of gunhammers had ridged them thick and heavy.

"Seems foolish to ride this country without a side gun," I said casually.

His eyes never left the smoke he was we

rolling. "Why, Marshal?"

I pushed back in my chair. "Lots of snakes around here, mister. Can't tell when one might show up."

He finished rolling the quirly and put a sulphur to its tip. "Two-legged or crawling variety, Marshal?"

Now I don't take much truck with gunmen, even the nicer ones who don't push their weight around. "The two-legged kind ain't welcome around here," I said testily. "Quarro's got no room for gunmen."

His thin lips parted over white, even teeth. It wasn't much of a smile but it was real. "Sounds just like the place I'm looking for, Marshal. Gunmen ain't got no business cluttering up a decent, respectable town."

I grunted. "You ain't fooling me, Mister. You come riding into town without guns, trying to act like something you ain't. The day you start wearing guns, you're leaving Quarro!"

The thin smile still cornered the edges of his mouth. "That sounds fair enough, Marshal. I figure a man wears guns when he's looking for or running from trouble. I'm doing neither."

Our eyes locked for a moment, then he wheeled the sorrel and rode off down the street. I had his description tabbed hard in my mind. I decided to ride over to the county seat the next day and see if there wasn't a 'Wanted' on him.

The silent battle went on between Jim Blade and myself for the best part of a month. I had him figured for what he actually was, but I couldn't prove it. There wasn't any 'Wanted' on him, but that didn't fool me. He was a gunman, pure and simple. When I proved it I was going to run him out of Quarro.

I never had a man prey on my mind the way that Jim Blade did. I spent most of my spare time trying to think up some way of proving my thought, make him show his stripe. It got to a point where I actually began hating him for making a fool of me. When we'd meet he'd give me that thin, mocking smile of his; daring me to show him up for what he actually was.

I thought I had him the Saturday I got all the men in Quarro together for a shooting contest. There's nothing a gunman likes better than to show off his superior skill in front of a group of men. However, this Jim Blade had me figured down to the last card. He paid his dollar entrance fee, then he sat quietly on the sidelines while the other men did the shooting.

THAT shooting contest was a big flop. There wasn't a man in Quarro who could shoot worth a damn, including myself. From time to time I glanced at Blade and saw he was enjoying the proceedings with evident amusement. By the time the men were shooting from the twenty-yard line I was disgusted. My plan to make Blade show his hand was failing.

Blade's eyes narrowed when he saw me heading his way. "Pretty poor shooting, ain't it, Blade?" I said.

He shrugged his shoulders. "I've seen worse, Marshal."

I profferred him my gun, butt-first. "You've paid your dollar, it entitles you to shoot for the prize money."

Blade's eyes flicked up to meet mine. "Still pushing, aren't you, Marshal?"

"You're not fooling anybody!" I said hotly. "You and your kind ain't wanted around here, Blade. When I prove you're a gunman, I'm gonna run you out of town."

The day was hot, but I felt the cold bite of Blade's eyes as he stared at me. "Don't call me a gunman again, Marshal," he said slowly. "There's a big difference between a gunman and a gunfighter." He got up and walked away, never once glancing back to see if I was watching him.

His talk about a gunman and a gunfighter didn't have me fooled at all. There wasn't any difference between the two in my book. No matter what they called themselves, they were all killers.

Blade and I were both in the Oasis Saloon, the afternoon a rider came charging into town with the news. As soon as we could get the man to simmer down and talk straight, I got the worse piece of news any marshal could hope to hear. The Pecos Kid and his band of gunhawks were heading toward Quarro!

I took a quick drink to settle my nerves,

then I started to do some thinking. Riding to the county seat for help was out of the question. The Kid and his gang were too close to Quarro. The thought that I had to face the issue myself sent a cold chill running down my spine. I had grown old in my job as marshal, too old to face the gun-speed of the Pecos Kid.

I pulled my Colt, flipped open the cylinder and pushed the extra shell in under the hammer. I glanced up to see Blade's cold eyes watching my movements. "If you buck the kid, you're crazy, Marshal," he said. "The Kid's a gunman—a real killer."

"You seem to know a lot about the Pecos Kid," I said sneeringly. "Maybe he's a friend of yours?"

Blade's eyes never left mine. "He was—once," he said slowly. "But he's a killer now, who kills for the fun of watching men die. He's too much for you, Marshal, unless you're tired of living." He turned before I could say anything, then I watched the broad silhouette of his shoulders as he pushed through the batwings.

I got to thinking pretty hard about the Pecos Kid and all the other gunmen I had heard about. Jesse James, Johnny Ringo, even Billy the Kid, all had one thing in common—their pride. I was gambling that the Pecos Kid wouldn't be any different. His pride would force him to accept my single challenge to a shoot-out. With luck I could get in a single shot before his roaring guns tore me to ribbons.

The next hour was the longest one of my life. When I finally heard the dull, thundering hoofbeats of the Kid's horses, I was tight as a fiddlestring. Time was running out on me, it would be just seconds before I was facing the Pecos Kid across the muzzle of a smoking Colt. I checked my gun again, for the hundredth time, then I forced myself to walk toward the street.

The town was deserted, having the stillness of death as I pushed through the doors and faced the sunlight. The Pecos Kid and his hawks were riding up the street. They were within a hundred yards of the Oasis when Jim Blade made his appearance.

As Blade walked steadily down the street I saw his head flick in my direction. "Find a hole, Marshal!" he said tightly.

I tried to tell him to wait, but the words stuck tight in my throat. The inner sickness of shame washed through my body as I watched Blade go steadily forward to face the outlaw killer. This was the man I had hated; had taunted for not carrying guns. Now he was pacing down the street carrying two of them—two twin messengers of death strapped low on his hips.

I saw the tiny puffs of dust squirt from the toes of Blade's boots as he continued his advance. His long-fingered hands hung easily at his sides, scant inches from the twin Colts nestling silent and deadly in their holsters.

WHEN Blade was within twenty yards of the Kid he stopped. There was a cold grimness written across his face that made the flesh crawl on my arms.

"I figured you'd finally get here, Kid," Blade said evenly.

The Kid stepped down from his horse with the same lithe smoothness that was so characteristic of Blade. His lean, hard face broke into a cold smile that was a carbon copy of the man he was facing.

"I'm tired of ducking every town you're in," the Kid said. "You've got everybody thinking I'm afraid of you."

Blade's eyes narrowed. "You've done a lot of useless killing with those guns of yours, Kid. You're cold-blooded, mean. Now you've come to call me."

The Kid's shoulders were cocked, his hands hanging talon-hooked beside his killer guns. The slight smile on his face had changed into a brutal sneer.

"Heard you'd hung up your guns, Jim. Looks like you've lost your guts."

Blade's eyes lifted to the mounted gunhawks. "They backing your play, Kid?" The Pecos Kid's expression never changed. "I don't need them," he said. "You can start crawling when you're ready."

The air was sticky and hot, without the slightest whisper of a breeze. Blade's hands hung loose and easy at his sides. For a moment I thought I saw indecision

written on his face, then he said, "You're no credit to the gun you wear, Kid. You'll never be anything but a lousy killer. Your kind never changes." He pulled his tall frame to its full height. "Make your play, Kid. I'm waiting."

The Kid's cocky sneer suddenly vanished and the feral glare of an animal appeared in his eyes. During the few short moments of talk he had been working himself into a state of savage, killing madness. With speed almost beyond the eye, the Kid's hand blurred toward the holsters tied low on his hips. In the barest fraction of a second his shoulders had dipped, his right foot had dropped back and the guns had appeared in his hands. I could see the wild, savage smile of the true killer distorting the lean, hard lines of his face.

There was a sudden roaring, yammering of twin Colts. My eyes went toward Blade, waiting for him to fall. I stood transfixed, hardly realizing it was Blade's guns that were spitting the horrible cacophony of death. It was then that I realized the true difference between a gunman and a gunfighter. Blade had tried to back off, hadn't wanted to use his guns to kill, but the Kid had forced his hand.

I counted ten shots as they sped from Blade's guns into the Kid's body. The big slugs turned the outlaw's body back and forth, like a giant's hands toying with a rag doll. The Kid's body wobbled tiredly, then as death grabbed with icy fingers the guns dropped from his lifeless hands and his body slumped to the street.

Twin tendrils of smoke spiraled upward from the muzzles of Blade's guns as he shifted his gaze to the mounted gunhawks behind the Kid's inert body. His eyes asked an unvoiced question.

The group of hawks shook their heads in unison. One rider urged his horse forward. "This wasn't out fight, Blade," he said. He nodded down toward the Kid's lifeless body. "We warned him against coming after you, but he wouldn't listen."

One moment they were all there, then they were gone and the street was quiet again. Blade walked forward until he was standing over the Kid's bullet-torn body. With infinite gentleness he bent down and cradled the Kid's body in his arms. I watched with stony eyes as he carried his burden to the sorrel waiting at the tie-rail in front of the Oasis. The aura of other great gunfighters surrounded him at that moment. Earp, Hickock, Masterson—all were walking in his shadow as he rode out of town.

The sun was touching the horizon when I topped my horse and followed Blade's trail to the cemetery on the outskirts of town. There was a new mound of earth off to one side, under the sheltering limbs of the cemetery's only cottonwood. I stepped down from my horse and walked close to the grave, peering at the crude lettering on the cross. I read the few words carved there, then my eyes went to the twin guns hanging from the vertical tree of the cross itself. I turned then and looked out toward the horizon, trying to see the tall, gray-eyed man who would be riding a sorrel horse. He had kept his promise to leave my town if ever forced to use his guns. But he had shown me the real difference between a gunman and a gunfighter. He had made me realize that the flaming gun would always be the same—the difference was the man behind it.

As I headed back to town the few words inscribed on the cross hammered back at me. They had said: "The Pecos Kid—John Randin Blade." Then I thought about the two guns hanging from the cross. Jim Blade had tried to put down his guns the first day I saw him. Now I was sure he was finished with them forever. He had left his guns hanging from the cross of his outlaw brother's grave.

Standish eased his gun around to settle squarely on the leader

BANDIT BREED

By T. V. OLSEN

WHEN STANDISH picked out the light wagon approaching the seep from the northeast, he left the height of the sunscorched limestone outcrop and walked down to the others waiting in their camp in the cottonwoods. Standish was a nearly gaunt young man whose dark-burned face, which now as often curtained his feelings, betrayed his Indian blood. His walk held the stiffness of a man cramped too long in unceasing unmoving vigilance—while the others slept through the hot midday hours.

They roused out now, the three of them on their feet even as Standish came up.

Renshaw asked, "Keller?"

"There's a wagon coming." Standish said. "If it's Keller, he's got someone with him."

Renshaw shoved his hat back from his thick, curly, iron-gray hair. He was a heavy-set man with a kindly, reflective face. He was the leader and looked it. He said, authoritatively, "Gentlemen, Keller was to come alone. Will you take your positions?"

Simm Keena smiled, his brooding and deep-sunk eyes brightened at the thought of trouble because it was all he understood or even cared for. Moving like a lean wolf, he headed farther into the stream-created bog where the camp lay, and sank noiselessly down behind a willow clump. Leach, a tall angular half-wit of a man who never spoke and who

Standish had stood for many things, but maltreating women wasn't one of them

made up in animal awareness what he lacked in intelligence, headed upstream and flattened on the ground behind more willows. Renshaw and Standish took up similar positions around the camp so that to all outward appearances, it was deserted—though the four men from their strategic places of hiding could see anyone who entered it without being seen themselves.

Standish was standing in sunlight-mottled immobility behind a cottonwood so that he merged as one with it. He thought with a still-faced amusement how very methodical Renshaw could be in matters small and large. For Bart Renshaw built dream-plans on a grand scale, but for one reason or another they rarely crystallized. He and his men were rat-poor, living like hunted animals, and it was only the force and weight of Renshaw's personality that had so far held the gang together.

Today, the meeting with Keller might read the future of Renshaw's sway over his men, who were restive, mutinous, and tired of promises.

Standish could hear the wagon nearing camp, and presently it drew up within the glade of cottonwoods.

Standish, watching from the gold-flecked shadow of his giant cottonwood, felt a thin backwash of suprise at the sight of the other rider on the high seat of Keller's buckboard.

Renshaw left the cover of a willow stand and walked to the wagon with a drive to his massive stride that told Standish of the leader's angry impatience.

Renshaw's voice, when he spoke to Keller, was of a deceptive gentleness. "A woman?" he said.

Linc Keller stepped down from the buckboard. He was a slight young man of average height whose movements held a wiry nervous energy. Keller wore a black business suit, town shoes, and a fawn-colored Stetson. He brushed at non-existent dust on his trousers and didn't meet Renshaw's gaze.

"My wife, Renshaw," he said slowly.

"Fine," Renshaw said with cold anger, "but why bring her here?"

"Damn it, I had to! She was in the next room listening when your Indian came to my house with your message to meet here. She heard everything, and I had to bring her. She wouldn't listen to reason."

Standish, with Leach and Keena, had moved from cover into plain sight. They watched the tall, red-haired young woman of slender and stately form, heightened by her dress of soft gray material.

"We can keep her here until the job's over," Keller was saying placatingly. "There is no reason why trouble should come from her being here."

"As to that, I can answer for me—but not for my men," Renshaw said dryly, flicking a glance at the steady interest in the faces of his men. Then he glanced back at the young woman. "Your husband is a damned fool, Mrs. Keller. But I reckon you know that. Permit me to help you down."

WITH a certain courtliness native to him, Renshaw swung the girl down, gave a curt nod to her murmured, "Thank you," and turned back to Keller.

Standish gave her a full, curious appraisal. At the very least, she was a quiet, soft-voiced lady. There was a bruise on her left cheek where her husband must have struck her in forcing her to come here with him. For no reason that he understood, Standish felt a sudden quiet hatred toward Keller. Because he was part Indian, he admitted this honestly to himself.

Renshaw was saying to Keller in a hard voice, "I'm not gambling for a pig in a poke. You said there's big money in your bank. There'd better be."

Keller nodded swiftly, a feverish gleam in his eyes. Ad Standish knew that gleam—his earliest remembrances were of a father who had reaped a small fortune running guns and liquor to the embattled tribe of Standish's own halfbreed mother. That, Standish knew, had been a marriage of convenience for his father, to facilitate the liaison of his gun and whisky running to the Sioux. The motives of the white man's insatiable lust for gold had never been apparent to Standish himself, and he was only one-fourth Indian. But the red blood ran deep in him, as Renshaw often remarked, and for this reason the leader often had Standish do the jobs requiring great patience or stealth or woodcraft. The tedious

watches, the tracking, the message-bearing —such as taking a message yesterday to the home of Keller (who had mistaken him for an Indian) in the very heart of the Wyoming cowtown of Indian Grove—were always assigned to Standish.

"There's money, all right," Keller was saying now. "I haven't been cashier there ten years for nothing. With the inside information I can give you on the bank, you can take out enough to make us all rich, and without much risk."

"Especially to you," Renshaw said. "You know, you're hungry, Keller. You're real hungry. I figured it out when you went to all that trouble to get in touch with a wandering bunch of bad actors like us—so we can knock over the bank that's given you a living for ten years."

Keller surveyed the leader with a faint repugnance. "At least I don't intend to make my life's living knocking over banks. It's a stinking business."

"A business," Renshaw said softly.

"Just talking," Keller said quickly.

Standish arranged his blanket-coat on the ground beneath a tree, then walked silently, still-faced, over to Keller's wife. "Ma-am, I've fixed a place for you under that tree. You'd best sit down."

Mrs. Keller looked up in surprise at him, and her blue eyes swiftly searched his face. Standish braced himself for the cold denial of a white woman's scorn.

Instead, she murmured, "Thank you," with an unforgotten dignity, and walked to the tree to sink onto his folded coat. In her time she was treated like a lady, Standish thought; but that's long-gone.

Keena hadn't missed this byplay. He chuckled and lounging over to Keller, said, "If I was you, I'd watch my wife around that noble Indian, Keller."

A remote, cold wrath stirred in Ad Standish, but his face did not change. Keena went on amusedly, "He's the spawn of a whisky runner and a Sioux squaw. The blood's bad, Keller."

Standish felt the taut pale strain in his own face. For weeks he'd endured Simm Keena's random insults, and kept his place. He'd found that all people touched with Indian blood were tainted in white eyes. The offense of an Indian striking back at a white man was unendurable, unforgivable.

But so were Keena's small cruelties.

STANDISH came slowly up to Keena. He said softly, "Shut your rank mouth," and slashed the back of his hand across Keena's face.

Keena gave way a step, lost balance, and backpedaled to keep on his feet. He came up against a small deadfall and fell backward to the ground. Mouthing a savage curse, he was on his feet serpent-quick, reaching for his holstered gun.

Renshaw was at Keena's side and ready with an iron grip that immobilized Keena's arm before he could clear the holster. To Standish, Renshaw snapped, "Take it easy," and to Keena, "Sit down."

Keena was shaking hotly. "I'll kill him!"

"Sure. Now sit down." Renshaw glanced at Standish who still stood warily, poised on the balls of his feet. "Did you hear me? I said, take it easy."

"I don't give one little damn what you said," Standish said.

"Don't be funny, Ad," Renshaw snapped, not conceiving a serious rebellion on his hands.

"I don't feel funny, Bart," Standish said slowly. "I don't feel funny at all."

Renshaw frowned. "Are you looking for trouble?"

"No. But I can take all you hand out."

Renshaw and Keena faced Standish stiffly, and Keller and his wife were watching apprehensively. Even the shambling Leach, in the act now of turning supper bacon in the spattering skillet above the small fire, stopped in mid-motion and carefully laid down his fork, readying for what might come.

Renshaw and Standish watched each other in wariness, and Ad Standish thought sinkingly, I'm pushing too far, and then, in a sudden prideful resolution, No! Have it all out at once. There's just so far they can push a man.

The wintry fury in Renshaw's face became tempered with uncertainty, and after a moment more of hesitation, Standish could see him deciding to let it go at that.

The leader said now in a lesser tone that made some token effort to salvage authority. "There'll be no more of this between you."

Renshaw turned away then with an air of no more than a faintly ruffled irritation, but Standish was not deceived; he thought with the calm fatalism of an Indian, he hates my guts now because I faced him down, and he knows I know it.

They ate an early supper in a harrowing silence, Mrs. Keller sitting off by herself. Afterward, her husband brought her a plate of food and she refused it—and fifteen minutes later accepted a plate brought to her by Standish. Keller went off to sulk by himself, and Kenna—this time—said nothing. He found a bottle of whisky in his saddlebag and nursed it along until Renshaw, cursing him roundly, took it away and broke it on a rock, saying that they were doing the job tonight, and by God, they were going to do it right.

Renshaw squatted against a tree, smoking into the lowering dusk, brooding at the ground as though wrestling a knotty problem. Finally he knocked the dottle from his pipe, stepped over next to the fire and directed the others to gather around.

"Pay attention now," he said. He smoothed out about two square feet of ground and with a stick began sketching lines and squares on it to represent the streets and buildings of Indian Grove, Wyoming. Plying Linc Keller with questions, Renshaw built up a detailed scheme in which each man knew his place. With Keller's first-hand help, the leader went over names and locations of buildings, descriptions of key townspeople, roads to travel in case they became separated. He minutely timed and placed every move down to where to tie their horses and who would watch them.

Keller raised an objection which Renshaw scratched without lifting his voice. "We need you with us, Keller. We need you to handle things inside the bank, once we're in there. You work there; you know where the biggest money is kept, how we can get at it quickest. Don't worry about your wife. I'm leaving Ad Standish here, to take care of her."

Keller looked wildly at Standish. "But—"

"Would you rather I left Leach or Keena?"

Keller looked at Keena's depraved face and at the vague-eyed Leach, and shook his head slowly. "It's as you say," he said almost inaudibly.

IN THE lowering dusk, the men broke up to find their hobbled horses and saddle them. Standish remained by the fire, staring into its red-glow heart, wondering why Renshaw should be concerned about Mrs. Keller, and could find no certain answer. He thought, the old fox is getting devious.

Standish could see Keller approaching his wife who hadn't moved from her position by the tree. She looked up without speaking at his approach.

"You won't be sorry, Doris," Keller said. "We'll leave this place. You'll have wealth, fine clothes, everything you deserve that I couldn't give you as a petty cashier."

"That you can as a petty thief? I am not going wih you, Linc," Mrs. Keller said quietly.

"You will, Doris. No matter what you think of me, there's nowhere else you can go."

"And I tell you that I will not," she said in an iron voice.

"Don't try my patience," Keller said harshly. "I mean what I say."

"You always mean what you say. No one else does in your mind."

Keller abruptly switched to another tack. "I've slaved and sweated to give you a good home, now I want to give you something better, and this is my thanks."

Mrs. Keller showed him a sudden thin and withering contempt. "Don't shout at the stars, Linc. They can't hear you."

"Please," Keller said wearily, almost pleadingly. "Consider it, Doris." As though seeing that there was no more to be said, he went over to the others to mount the horse that Leach had caught for him.

Settling easily into his saddle, looking like a gray-haired centaur, Renshaw wheeled his mount out of camp, lifting a hand to Standish in parting. "Take care of the little lady, Ad. Don't worry, you'll get your

share, even though you're not in on the job."

Renshaw's gaze settled briefly, sharply, on Mrs. Keller. Then he rode out, flanked by Keller, Keena, and Leach.

Standish stood, rolling a cornshuck cigarette, watching Mrs. Keller sitting listlessly against the tree and staring at the ground. She was a beautiful woman; and now Standish understood with a dark conviction the meaning of Renshaw's concern—and why he had left Standish here to make certain she would not escape or be harmed. And did her husband suspect? Standish's self-reply was an unhesitating negative. Thinking of Keller, remembering how he'd vacillated from overbearing to pleading against his wife's unwavering resistance, Standish thought, the man's an empty barrel.

The night was moving down over the grove; a stormy nightwind stirred blackly through the high cottonwood boughs. Standish cupped his hands around the flaring match to light his cigarette. He looked up to see Mrs. Keller watching him.

She said quietly, without preliminary, "You're a gentleman."

Standish, faintly startled, only shrugged. "Maybe I'm a gentleman. They call me an Indian."

"You are not really an Indian, then?"

"My mother was a half-breed, my father white. Renshaw says I may be only a quarter Indian blood, but it runs deep. Maybe he's right. Keena says Indian and white together makes bad blood, and maybe *he's* right."

"There is one man who would not have agreed with that last," Mrs. Keller said quietly. "My father. He was a furtrader in the early days. He used to tell me that many Indians were of an inborn integrity that placed them above all but a few whites."

Surprised at the easy and natural way he had come into conversation with this woman, Standish, usually reserved said, "Your father was rare, then. Few men think that way."

"Yes, very few. But I'm thinking you're very like my father," she observed with startling candor. "He had taken on some Indian characteristics from many years of living with them—and you walk and talk much like him."

"Your father was an honest man. No, Mrs. Keller, it has to run deeper than the skin. If I'm not bad blood, why'm I here?"

"Why did your leader leave you here to guard me, if he thought you were not to be trusted?" she countered. "Why not one of those other men?"

He said nothing, looking at her.

"I think," she said at last, "that you had little choice to begin with."

MAYBE you're right," Standish said slowly, never having thought of it just that way. "I lived till I was ten with my mother's tribe, you see. When the tribe went on to reservation, an officer's wife from the nearby fort adopted me. She raised me and educated me. I knew the white man's ways, but I still looked like and moved like an Indian. I lost half-a-dozen jobs because lots of white men won't work side by side with an Indian. I thought outlaws might accept a man on his own merit, if solid citizens wouldn't—and I've been with Renshaw a year now."

"You see," she said. "You had no choice. Far less than I did—when I made my mistake."

Standish knew she meant her husband, and he said nothing.

"He's a coward," Mrs. Keller said quietly, then was silent a moment. "Maybe that's not right. It was as much my fault as his. When my father died, I married Linc because I thought I saw in him something that never existed. A case of waiting for a knight in shining armor, then finding the armor is tarnished. So I never was a wife to him as I should have been, and probably that's much of what made him as he is now—selfish, and dishonest, as well as cowardly. When I overheard the message you brought him—telling him to meet this outlaw Renshaw here to plan a bank robbery—I knew that Linc had taken the last step down the ladder. I wondered for a long time, what to do: to say nothing, to notify the sheriff, or to try to talk Linc out of it. Well, I tried the last. And when he found out that I knew—well, there was no talking to him.

He went almost crazy. And here I am."

"What about when he comes back? Will you go with him?"

"I said I wouldn't," she said wearily, "but of course I will. I'm the only one that can save him from himself. Perhaps, I can persuade him to return the money." Her voice trailed off.

Standish said gently, "You can't make heaven into hell, and you can't make your husband less than what he is by painting him with rainbows."

"But that's only part of it," Mrs. Keller said hesitantly. "I owe this to him, for not being a good wife before. Don't you see? I *have* to pay."

Standish nodded. Any Indian would understand, for an Indian fiercely castigated himself for a fault. But Standish was only part Indian, and he knew that a person should stop paying when payment is no longer of value.

"Do you think you can help him now?" Standish asked.

She bit her lip. "I have to try. You think I'm a fool."

"No. I admire loyalty. It's a rare thing."

She lifted her head, and said, "Thank you," in a voice that only hinted at the unvoiced gratefulness in her face. Seeing it, Standish felt something which touched a rare depth in him, and felt it move powerfully between them for one timeless moment.

"Better try to sleep," he said. Moving off in the grove a ways and throwing out his bedroll under the trees, Standish stretched tiredly out, wondering if he should have told her his suspicious about Renshaw's designs on her. Still, why alarm her if he was not certain?

A lonely man all his life, a man of two races who was now acknowledged by neither, Standish had tonight found a rare understanding in a woman. It had fostered an odd settling sadness in him, and a harsh decision too. If Renshaw made a move to harm Mrs. Keller in any way, he would have to reckon with Ad Standish—first.

Oddly calm now, and readied for what might come, Standish relaxed in his blankets and slept.

THE outlaws returned when the first dawn-stain touched the eastern horizon. Standish was roused out instantly by the tinkle of bridle chains, and went forward to meet them—Renshaw, Keena and Leach. It was as Standish had half-expected. They were leading Keller's horse, but Keller was not with them.

The way Renshaw told it, they'd ridden into town at midnight and gotten into the bank without a hitch. It was as they were leaving that a townsman spotted them and shot Keller out of his saddle. The others had gotten away untouched, and even shook the posse that tried to follow them down. "They'll never trail us over the country we rode," Renshaw said, finishing. "I'm sorry about your husband, Mrs. Keller," he added blandly, "but it's all in the game."

Standish glanced at Mrs. Keller, standing with a stunned horror in her face. She had not loved her husband, but he'd been her husband.

Standish's jaw tightened. He thought, maybe the posse couldn't follow your trail, Bart, but I can.

Unnoticed by the others who were too occupied with the gold they'd gotten, Standish found and saddled his own horse and rode quietly from the camp. He followed the cleverly covered trail the outlaws had made returning. There was something he had to know. . .

It was much later when he returned to camp. As he rode in, Standish warily gauged the odds. Leach was sitting at the far side of the clearing, cleaning his rifle; Renshaw and Keena were squatted on the ground playing two-handed stud with bank money. Mrs. Keller was sitting apathetically by her tree, and barely glanced up as Standish dismounted.

Renshaw threw his cards down and stood, scowling. "Where you been, Ad?"

"Picking up your backtrail to find out what really happened to Keller," Standish said, and watched the slow, poised stiffening of the three men. It was all Standish needed, and now, in a fluid movement, he drew his gun and cocked it, leveling it on the three. Mrs. Keller was looking up now, staring at him, and it was to her he spoke.

"Your husband wasn't killed in town, Mrs. Keller, and he wasn't killed by a citizen of Indian Grove. I didn't think so, so I backtracked the trail they made coming here. Your husband got out of town all right, but between town and here, I read sign where one of the boys here reined behind him and shot him in the head. I found where he'd fallen from his horse, then he was dragged off a way and buried under about a foot of sand—where I found him."

"We covered all that," Kenna said tersely. "We covered it good."

"Why, Simm," Standish murmured, "you ought to have remembered—you reminded me often enough."

"Reminded you of what?"

"I'm part Indian. You don't hide things like that—even from a part Indian." Standish looked at Renshaw now, easing his gun around to settle squarely on the leader. "Why don't you tell Mrs. Keller why you killed her husband, Bart?"

A fine sweat-gleam covered Renshaw's face. "You aren't letting a woman come between you and your friends, Ad?" then in sudden anger, "Take that damned gun off me!"

"Friends," Standish said. "You shot Keller in the back of the head. You—or Simm here—would need less reason to shoot me the first time you got the chance, after the way I faced you down this afternoon."

"What'll you do, then?" Renshaw asked, and Standish recognized the ultimatum in his tone. He felt the stirring of an angry anticipation, thinking, the fat's in the fire.

"I'll take you—and the money—in to the sheriff in Indian Grove and leave it up to him."

Renshaw said in a violent whisper, "Bedamned if I'll give up to you! Take him!"

KEENA's gun was out first, and Standish shot once, blindly, without aiming, and Keena dropped his gun and sank down on his knees with the pain as he clutched his thigh.

Renshaw snapped a shot at Standish, then ran for the shelter of the cottonwoods at the north end of the clearing. The bullet threw up dirt far to Standish's left, and then Standish ran, bending for the shelter of the limestone outcrop, shouting to Mrs. Keller, "Get down on your face!"

He saw her flatten herself on the ground and then he went for the cover of the outcrop, just as Renshaw's second shot spanged harmlessly off the rotting limestone.

Standish could see now only that Leach had taken up a position behind one of the biggest cottonwoods, and for a while a wary silence hung over the seep except for Keena groaning in the pain of his wound.

Standish heard the crashing of brush back in the grove, moving off to his left. He knew that Renshaw was trying to circle to get him from behind, knowing that Standish was trapped behind the isolated outcrop. And Leach was waiting to pick Standish off when he moved from its shelter.

Then the crash of a rifle split the air and drowned all other sounds. Standish saw that Mrs. Keller, lying flat and inching herself along, had reached the tree where Leach had leaned his rifle. Now she was shooting at Leach with his own rifle to keep him pinned behind the vantage point he'd chosen—so that he dared not show himself to shoot at Standish.

Standish left the shelter of the outcrop then, cutting wide in a low crouching run to head off Renshaw in his wide circuit to get behind Standish.

He saw Renshaw suddenly as the leader moved into a break in the cottonwoods. Surprise was on the man's face at seeing Standish running to met him. Renshaw swung his pistol up in a tight, desperate arc. Standish stopped in his tracks, pointed his own gun before him, and shot once by instinct. Renshaw, unable to draw and aim in his pell-mell rush forward, plunged down on his face and did not move.

Standish moved over to the fallen man, turned him over, then straightened, looking down at Renshaw. Here, at least, it was finished.

Standish circled back to the camp by the same way Renshaw had come, so that he was almost upon Leach before the man saw him. "Don't bring that gun up, Leach," Standish said in a low voice. "You haven't a chance."

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The FUGITIVE

It was a deadly game they played, these two—the crafty killer and the sheriff who could trail a snake across a lava bed

By PHILIP MORGAN

EMMETT BURR walked into the bank in Roswell, New Mexico Territory, just as they were getting ready to close. The day's heat was still full on the land, stunning the people into lethargy as they waited with stolid patience for darkness and the meager relief it would bring.

Burr, who was known in certain parts by the name of Trinidad, saw with pleasure that there were only two men in the bank. One of these men was Robert Carter, president of the bank. The other was Ed Diers, the teller, who was twenty-six years old and was to be married in a week to Robert Carter's only daughter, Patricia.

Burr came directly to the teller's window and laid his gun over it, covering the two men with apparent negligence. It was an appearance that was completely false.

"Just be quiet and nobody gets hurt," Trinidad said cooly. "Sack up your money and slide it across to me. Then lay down on the floor." He didn't believe in wasting

words and he thought it was foolish to remind them that any resistance would mean instant death. He thought they should be able to tell by looking at him that he was no one to fool around with.

Both men stared at him in amazed consternation for several moments. Robert Carter opened his mouth to say something and then promptly closed it again. He was no coward, having lived in this country for twenty years and having faced the worst it could offer. But in the harshly drawn face of the man across the counter, he read enough to warn him.

"All right. Don't get nervous. We'll do as you say." Carter said this primarily for the instruction of the young man beside him, who was somewhat headstrong, but whom he loved like a son. He stuffed money into a leather bag, hurrying, wanting the man to leave. It was only money and meant nothing compared to a life.

Carter had the bag well filled now and the man across the counter said, "That's enough. Shove it across."

Carter did as he was told. Trinidad reached for the bag with his left hand and as he touched it, his gun swerved off slightly. Ed Diers made a frantic grab for the gun on his hip and Trinidad's gun cut a short arc and fired. Ed Diers groaned and slumped to the floor, dead almost instantly. Trinidad backed to the door and ran to his horse. Swinging up, he left Roswell at a hard gallop, riding south towards Mexico.

As he rode, he cursed the fool in the bank. Now they would be after him hammer and tong. It was bad, but it was one of the risks a man took in this business. It had happened before and he had always escaped. He would this time. As for the killing itself, it never occurred to him to feel any regret. Trinidad had the reputation among the few who knew him of being as cold-blooded as a rattlesnake and the reputation was deserved.

Trinidad rode south from Roswell, moving very fast, riding the horse unmercifully. That too was part of the plan. He rode until darkness dropped with the suddenness always surprising in the desert. Gradually, he had been drifting slightly east, toward the Pecos River, and now he raised the river and rode directly into it and crossed. On the far side, he dismounted in the river and gave the weary horse a hard slap across the rump. It lunged out of the river and trotted away.

Trinidad now turned north, walking in the shallows of the river, and not hurrying. All he carried was the sack of money. He waded for an hour, covering some two miles, and then he came from the river on a rock formation and crossed this formation to a small patch of grass a half mile from the river. His horse was staked out here on the end of a sixty foot reata. The length of the picket had given the animal plenty of grazing room and the whole area had been lightly trampled.

Trinidad recovered his saddle and bridle from under the overhang of a boulder and saddled the horse. Making sure his two canteens were in place, he swung up and rode north, directly north, riding at a walk at first and then at the mile-eating lope—a walk and lope that the fine Spanish animal under him could maintain for days.

By morning, Trinidad was well north of Roswell and he thought of the long trip ahead and grimaced. Fort Sumner and Santa Rosa to Raton and the Pass. Then to the town whose name he bore and on north to Pueblo and then Cheyenne. All of these towns would be a glimpse of lights shining out through the night and nothing more. For he would pass as silently and as quickly as possible, across Wyoming and into Montana, always moving. He would sleep during the day, build only one small fire in dawn's first light when the smoke was least likely to be seen. Eating the jerky and hardtack he had in the saddle bags, he would be a ghost upon the land for a distance of eleven hundred miles— Until he rode down the street of Great Falls. Then and then only would he stop.

For this was the secret Trinidad Burr had learned. Distance was his ally, distance and time. No man was going to follow him eleven hundred miles. The chase

might be hot in New Mexico, but to a lawman in Montana, he was just another outlaw, no less nor no more important than any other. The sounds of pursuit faded with the miles until they whimpered out over the vast ranches of this far land. The law became an old dog with no teeth a thousand miles and more from the place of the crime. No man was going to follow him that far.

DAN NYE heard the single shot that crashed somewhere down the street, somewhere inside, since the echo of it was flat and lost at once. He had been reading in his office, waiting for darkness as everyone was waiting in Roswell. He came out of his chair running, but was only in time to see Trindid Burr ride from town. His hand lifted his gun from the holster without conscious thought, with the practiced ease of long habit. But he did not fire.

People were running across the street toward the bank and his mind lashed at them even as he knew he could not fire for fear of hitting them. Running to the bank, he elbowed his rough way through the men gathered in the doorway, and came inside. He saw nothing and had to come up to the teller's window before he could see Carter kneeling on the floor with Ed Diers's head in his hands. Tears were coursing down Carter's seamed cheeks and the glance he raised to the sheriff was tortured. Neither man said anything through one long moment.

"I'm sorry, Bob," Dan Nye said and meant it. It was not only because of Carter he said it, but because of himself. Ed Diers had been a good friend.

Carter climbed heavily to his feet now. "I guess I have to go and tell Pat. I'd rather cut off my arm."

"You better give me some kind of a description," Dan said gently. "It might be we'll have a long search and we'll need it to get out some dodgers."

Carter seemed stunned and almost unable to talk. But now he shook his head savagely, thinking back to the man's face. And he remembered it all right, clear and unmistakeable.

"He was tall, Dan. Almost as tall as you. Maybe an inch less. He had a good build, all muscle and no softness on him anywhere. He's hard, Dan, don't forget that for a minute. His face is angular and he had a long, straight nose with a high bridge. Black hair and gray eyes and small ears." He stopped talking then and considered it through a long pause.

Dan Nye said nothing. He had known Bob Carter for a long time and respected his opinion in all things.

"I'll tell you, Dan," Carter said, "it was like we'd gone back ten years to the Lincoln County War. You remember how some of the men riding for McSween looked. He had that same look. You can't just pick it out and explain it. But you look at a man and you know he's dangerous and you stay away from him. I saw the same look on this one. I guess maybe Ed didn't. He didn't know much about those times."

Dan nodded, knowing exacty what Carter meant. There was a breed that bore the killer stamp so plainly that only the young, or the foolish failed to see it. And knowing that, he could walk into a roomful of men and pick out this one without Carter's excellent description. He turned immediately away and left the bank.

Outside, he said briefly, to the waiting men, "You'd better get mounted," and crossed the street and went along a sidestreet to the corral where he kept his horse. When he had saddled, and ridden back to the bank, there were a dozen armed men waiting. He led them from town, knowing even as he did that they were making a mistake.

The smart thing would have been to wait until a tracker could be brought from the Mescalero Reservation fifty miles to the west. An Apache could have trailed the man, but none of these men with him could. If he had had time, he could have worked it out. But a popular young man had been brutally murdered and rage was in every man's heart and Dan knew better than to try reasoning with them. So they would ride out and

make a search, but unless he and Bob Carter were underestimating their man, they would find nothing.

And that's what happened. The trail led away straight enough, but darkness caught them five miles from town and they had to return. At dawn they were waiting to pick up the trail again and they followed it to the Pecos. The trail came straight out on the far side and led south again, towards Mexico.

Someone in the bunch, laughed loudly and called, "Boys, we've got a greenhorn. He ain't even trying to cover his tracks. We'll have him by night the way he rode that horse last night."

Maybe, Dan thought, but he was puzzled by the complete lack of any attempt at concealment. Two miles further on they found the horse grazing in a small patch of grass and Dan knew that he had been right. Looking at the horse, he felt like a fool. He should have noticed at once that the horse was lighter coming out of the river than going in. But he had been fooled, so now he would go back and start over again, with plodding, painstaking care until the day he would find the killer.

There was not the least doubt in his mind that this would happen. He was forty years old, tough and sometimes sardonic and always reticent, with the reticence of a man whose job was a lonely one. He had been sheriff of Chaves County for ten years and in those years had tracked down fifteen men. Ten of those men he had brought in to stand trial. The other five he had been forced to kill. He regretted the killings, each time getting sick, but he did what he had to do each time. For Dan Nye had a sense of duty that was the one great, consuming passion of his life.

They returned to Roswell. Recruiting more men, he split them into small posses and scattered them over the land in every direction. But he had no hope that they would find anything. The man they sought was a professional and only another professional would find him.

He attended the funeral of Ed Diers and the sight of Patricia Carter, leaning on her father's arm, her face white and sad, tore his heart. The grief of the very young was terrible while it lasted. The fact that it did not last long did not rob it of any intensity. Standing under the blazing sun, with his hat off, he thought that it was these things, the things that hurt a man, rather than the dangers he knew that lined a man's face, that put the faint fingers of gray in his hair.

As soon as the funeral was finished, he rode from town, going always back to the river. It was his starting point and from it he worked upstream and down, walking slowly, with patient care, knowing that sooner or later he would find what he sought. Time passed, but it meant little to him. His deputy was running things in town and patience was the first attribute of a good lawman. He thought indeed that patience was the difference between the good and the poor.

It took him a week to find it, but he found it. A tiny scrape on the rock that led him across to the small pasture where Trinidad's horse had grazed. Seeing how the trail ran straight north, he allowed himself a small smile of satisfaction. The man was good. He knew from reward dodgers that the man was Trinidad Burr, wanted in Oklahoma, Kansas, Texas and Utah. A killer and an extremely dangerous man.

Riding back into Roswell, Nye thought about the man, needing to know about him. For that was a big part of tracking men—or animals. A man had to understand his quarry. He knew that Burr was smart and he knew that he was dangerous, but there were things he did not know and it was those unknown qualities that always made it exicting.

Dan rode out of Roswell an hour later. He took a pack horse with him, lightly loaded with the supplies he would need. He rode directly for Raton Pass, knowing it to be the funnel through which all northern traffic had to flow. Settling on the leather, he rode on hour after dreary hour, implacable and thoroughly competent.

TRINIDAD made good time from Roswell to Raton. Camping well away from the town, he waited for night to make the crossing of the pass. It would be a little tricky, but he had been over it before and expected no trouble. But late in the afternoon it began turning dark and in a short while a driving rain broke over the parched land. Trinidad did not complain.

It was a bad break, but a man could expect a certain number of bad breaks, just as he could expect them to be balanced out with good. Since the rain was as good a cover as darkness, he saddled and rode for the pass at once. It was tougher than he had expected. The rain made the ground slick and the horse fell twice with him before he gave it up and walked.

Trinidad toiled all night, soaked and thoroughly miserable. It was cold this high. By morning, the rain had settled into a steady drizzle and he knew he could not safely travel. The hard rain had covered him, but this was like a thin mist that didn't cut down the seeing distance much.

He was only halfway through the pass, but he pulled into the trees and made his miserable camp. Wrapping himself in his slicker, he sat against a tree and tried to sleep. The day dragged interminably and he reminded himself that it cut one full day off his time schedule. And time was his greatest enemy. A posse could make the trip here a day quicker than he had made it.

Finally darkness crawled through the pass and he was able to go on. He still had to lead the horse and now his legs were two stumps without feeling. He was not a walker, having ridden constantly for twenty years. But he went doggedly ahead and was well out in the flat country beyond the pass when dawn rose-hued the eastern sky.

Coming out of the pass, he had seen the lights of Trinidad shining through the rain, beckoning him with an almost irresistible pull. There had been a time when he had spent three months in Trinidad, with a Mexican girl whose pretty face still haunted him sometimes. Until the night she sent her two brothers to kill and rob him.

By the purest accident, he had escaped the ambush and killed the two. Then he had scoured the town for the girl and found her at last cowering in her parents' dirty shack. He had shot her through the head and the story of him had spread until he was known as Trinidad, a name accompanied by a certain shrinking away, if not physically, then in the eyes of those who saw him.

Now, more tired than he could ever remember, those lights spoke to him of heat and good food and the warm touch of a woman's hand. With contempt, he thought that lesser men could not have resisted. That was why they all failed and were caught. Iron discipline was the answer. He planned his raids with the greatest possible care, but he planned the escape even more carefully.

So now he rode past Trinidad and kept on through the arid land of eastern Colorado. He camped in dry arroyos, knowing the danger of flash floods, but taking that risk rather than the greater one of discovery. Because if men were following him, they would expect someone to have seen him. If they found no-one who had, they would begin to believe that their quarry had gone another way. There were no tracks for them to follow, not after the hard rain. They would not follow as far as he could run.

In Colorado, he met dust storms. The wind kept at him all across the State, becoming something almost animate in his mind, an evil, whining thing that ate at his nerves and slowly drove him wild. He fought against this, knowing that it was driving him to recklessness, knowing it was destroying his mental discipline. Slowly, as the other small irritations of this tough ride began to irk and become larger and harder to bear because of the wind, he began to worry. It began to seem as if his luck was running out, that nature was setting a trap for him.

But he fought back, growing gaunt and

finding that his body was racked often by severe pains from the hard ride. He had experienced these pains before on long rides, but never like this. It was the damn wind. It was driving him crazy. He found himself raising his fist to the sky, cursing it in a wild voice. It frightened him. Always he had been coldly sure of himself and now he was beginning to doubt. Maybe when he was into Wyoming, the wind would stop.

But he passed Cheyenne, crossing the railroad tracks there, and moved out on the long ride in the shadows of the mountains on his left. And the wind kept on, howling down the distances, driving tumbleweeds across the earth in great bounding leaps. The horse was failing under him. He could sense it, feeling it as something that came up through his legs to register in his mind. They made poor time every night and finally he knew they would have to stop. The food was gone now and the horse was limping. It was as far as they could go.

That night he saw the faint lights of a small town and he turned the horse and rode across the sloping land towards them. Even as he made the decision, he felt a dread settle in his mind, an unreasoning dread, because no one was following him. He had come almost nine hundred miles and that was far enough. Yet the dread remained, unexplainable, but very real.

Coming into the town, he saw that it was nothing more than a scatter of a dozen frame buildings sitting along a one block street and some of the uneasiness vanished. There wouldn't be a sheriff and the local marshall was probably an old man who would give him no trouble. The thought of hot food made his stomach hurt and his weary body sagged in the saddle, already anticipating rest.

He patted the horse's shoulder and said to it, "We'll be all right. We're safe." Yet some faint warning, some primeval instinct sounded in some far corner of his mind. But Trinidad ignored it.

DAN NYE was a week behind Trinidad Burr when he started. But when he reached the pass beyond Raton, he was only six days behind, having made up a full day. He rode through the day and part of the night, not needing to hide. And he pushed his mount, knowing that it did not have to last him all the way. He changed horses at Raton, keeping the pack horse. It took him one day to push through the pass and here he gained again on Trinidad, although neither man was aware of this. But now the easy part was over. There were a lot of ways to ride once a man was out of the pass and in the open country beyond. Having no faith in finding anything, he stopped in Trinidad.

He spoke to the sheriff in Trinidad, who was a tall, thin man with a sorrowful expression. He laughed aloud when Dan told him who he was seeking.

"He ain't here, Nye, that much I know. Every Mexican in town is prayin' to see Trinidad Burr again. He wouldn't last five minutes in this town. That girl he killed here has about a million relatives."

Dan thanked him and moved on at once. It would be hard to pass to the west of Trinidad and would serve no useful purpose. So the outlaw probably had passed east of town. But where had he gone from there? Cheyenne lay straight north and Cheyenne was a good town where a man could find plenty of things to spend his money on. But swinging slightly east, a rider could strike Julesburg, a town partial to outlaws. And by swinging a little more to the east, he could move into Nebraska to Ogallala or Sydney, or across Nebraska to the Black Hills in Dakota. There were a lot of possibilities; he could not chance a guess.

So now he had to take a chance on finding Trinidad's tracks. The wind had been blowing steadily now and he didn't know about it. But he made a search east of town, hunting out the gullies where he would still find tracks, looking for the prints of the long-limbed horse that had carried Trinidad away from Roswell. He had no doubts about recognizing those tracks once he found them. The signs upon the earth made a book he had early

learned to read and understand.

He found them at a natural crossing of a deep arroyo. He was able to follow the tracks for a ways, far enough to learn all he needed to know right now. They led straight north and straight north meant Cheyenne.

There came the day, fifteen long, hard, brutal days after leaving Roswell, when Dan Nye rode down Cheyenne's street. And he guessed that he was no more than two or three days behind Trinidad Burr now. As he rode down the street, he watched the men he passed carefully. He laid his bright stare on them and the ones who looked back quickly dropped their gaze. For the hardness of his eyes striking them had the effect of cold steel. They saw a man worn rawhide thin by the ride he had made, but a man who sat his horse soldier straight and showed them no weakness. But Burr was not here.

Dan rode west from Cheyenne, guessing that Trinidad would pass that way, closer in towards the mountains where there would be less chance of discovery. West of town, he moved in on the railroad right-of-way and followed along beside it. The road-bed was built up and a horse crossing it was bound to leave deep tracks coming down. He wanted to find that place before dark and get started on the trail. From now on, he would have to hang tight to Trinidad's tracks. Trinidad could ride north and then cut west to the Jackson Hole, or keep on north to Montana. Or he might even have a hide-out on this side of the mountains. So it was a matter now of pure tracking.

Dan didn't find the trail until dusk was falling. But when he saw the plowed up ground down the side of the roadbed, he knew it was the one. He followed it a short ways in the fading light and he saw something that gave him a quick, hard lift. Trinidad's horse was not putting any great weight on its right front foot. The horse was limping, not badly yet, but that would come. The trail was not going to be a long one unless Trinidad changed horses and changed soon.

The next morning he followed a fresher and fresher trail. It put a strain on him, because he didn't dare chance coming over any rise unprepared. It strung his nerves wire-tight, knowing as he did the deadliness of the man he was hunting. There was going to be no easy way of taking Trinidad Burr. And Dan wanted to take Trinidad alive. Take him back to the sun-splashed plaza, to the gallows standing stark and new.

He came over a small rise at noon and a mile to his left saw the few buildings of a small town. The tracks led that way and then Dan knew for sure that Trinidad Burr had run as far as he was going to run. It had been nine hundred long miles, but he was here and Trinidad Burr was here and this thing that had started so violently was about to end and perhaps as violently as it started.

Dan came onto the town's wide, dusty street and passed the first two small houses. He saw a scatter of stores and on his left a saloon, the only two storey building in town. On his right were only two buildings, one a livery barn and the other a small saddle and leather shop. He passed this and now the silence, the waiting atmosphere of the town struck him like a blow. Something was badly wrong here. No child played in the street, no-one moved outside. He felt the hairs on the back of his neck raise, yet he didn't dare show any awareness. If Trinidad Burr was watching him over the barrel of a rifle, he would fire at the first sign Dan made.

DAN knew he had to make a move. He was opposite the livery barn now and this was the place. Once past it, he would have no cover. Raising his arm, he lifted his hat from his head and wiped his forehead with his forearm. In the same movement, he slammed the hat down against the buckskin's flank and jerked the reins to the right. The buckskin, startled and indignant, snorted and lunged to the right and took Dan into the broad door of the barn in three long jumps.

Dan rode with his muscles set against the half-expected shock of a bullet. Inside the barn, he left the horse in a long jump and was standing in the runway with his

gun in his hand, waiting for the shot It took him several moments to realize that nothing was going to happen, it had been that definite a warning. He wheeled slowly about on his heels and saw that he was alone in this part of the barn. He laughed with relief then and dropped his gun back in its holster.

Dan went after the buckskin, who had run only as far as a pile of hay against the barn's rear wall. He led the animal to a stall and tied him and took off the saddle. While he was still doing this, he heard the door from the office into the barn open. He went flat against the wall of the stall, expectantly waiting, his lips drawn back in an unconscious, savage smile. But the man who came into the runway was not Trinidad Burr. This man was old, short and crippled. Dan went back to his unsaddling.

The old man came up, his rheumy eyes looking Dan over and then showing some inner wisdom acquired from the looking. He said, "Long ride, stranger?" with some caution.

"Long enough," Dan said.

He did not know but what this town was hiding Trinidad Burr. He did not know if the people here were all friendly to the outlaw. But he knew of no way to ask questions without arousing suspicion, so he went directly to the point.

"Did a man ride in here last night on a big horse with a bad right front leg?"

"What does he look like?" the stableman asked suspiciously.

"Tall," Dan told him. "Black hair, gray eyes, maybe weighs a hundred and seventy or so. A wild one."

"You a friend of his?" the man asked.

Dan gambled now. Looking straight at the stableman to catch any reaction, he said, "No, I'm after him. He's wanted for murder in Roswell, New Mexico."

He saw alarm spring alive in the man's face. The man reached forward and grasped his arm. "He's here, all right. He's over there in the saloon. But that ain't all. We knew he was a wild one and we appointed a committee to go over and tell him to move on. They're over there right now."

"How many men did you send?" Dan asked harshly.

"Three," the old man said. "You don't suppose he'll do anything, do you?"

Dan swore and started for the door at once. The old man trotted at his side. Dan said, "Stay in here, old man."

But the man grabbed his arm and stopped him. "What'll he do?"

Dan shook off his hand and said savagely. "He'll step on them and squash 'em like so many bugs." The old man's face went slack with the shock of the words and then Dan was past him and out in the street. He crossed it directly, still hoping that Burr might not know him for what he was. Reaching the far side, he went around the first building and he was running now, knowing he was out of sight of the saloon, and knowing that the three townsmen who faced Trinidad Burr were in mortal danger. He rounded the building and ran along to the back of the saloon and found a rear door opening onto a loading platform. Springing onto the platform, he drew his gun and pushed inside. Crossing a store room, he opened the door on the far side and looked out into the saloon's main room.

Trinidad Burr stood beside a table. His hands hung negligently at his side and he was smiling. There was no warmth in that smile. It was only a mirror held up to the death inside the man. Standing in a close group in front of Burr were the three townsmen.

Trinidad's brittle voice was lashing at them. "If you want me out of town, you put me out. You either stand up and fight me, or you get down on your bellies and crawl out of here." He stopped talking and laughed at them, enjoying their humiliation.

They were not fighters and he had put them deliberately in a hole from which they could not back out without a complete loss of pride. He was stripping them of their manhood and he was enjoying it. Dan felt a sweeping contempt for the man and a return of the hot rage he had felt in Roswell.

Stepping further into the room, Dan lifted his gun and laid it on Trinadad Burr and said, "Just stand pat, Burr."

He drew back the hammer of the gun. The triple click of the cocking hammer fell loudly on the room's stillness. The three townsmen looked at Dan and relief showed on all of them.

Burr turned slowly to face Dan Nye. And a strange thing happened. The smile faded from his tough face and he looked resigned, almost as if he had been expecting this. Dan watched him with his entire attention.

Burr said bitterly, "You followed all the way." Burr shouted then, "You followed all the way, didn't you?"

Dan gave him the briefest of nods. "All the way from Roswell, Burr. And I would have followed you clear to hell. Drop the gun."

Burr shook his head. "Nine hundred miles. I never thought it could be."

He stopped for a minute and Dan could read what he was thinking. He was weighing his chances here against the chance of an escape on the trail back. Burr had no illusions about the man he faced. He could smell smoke on any man and he smelled it on this one. All of these things were going through his mind and Dan knew it. The weight that finally tipped the balance in the outlaw's mind was the spectre of the gallows waiting for him in Roswell. And, although Dan did not know this, the fatalistic acceptance of what his instincts had been telling him.

Dan couldn't say what it was that warned him Burr had decided to chance a fight, but he knew. He regretted it because he had wanted Burr to hang, but it was not going to be that way. So now his only concern was staying alive. Burr would be very fast and no man could be sure, even when he had the drop.

Burr said, feigning resignation, "It looks like you win, friend," and made a half seen gesture with his left hand.

But Dan was watching his right arm and he saw his shoulder rise. He fired but in the bare fraction of a minute that it took him to will his finger to pull the trigger, Trinadad Burr had his gun out of leather, cocked. The big slug caught him there, stopping his incredibly fast draw, throwing him back against the table. Trinidad coughed and took two stumbling steps away from the table and his legs became entangled in the rungs of the chair and he fell heavily, taking the chair down with him. He did not afterwards move.

The silence held on for a minute. Then one of the townsmen laughed nervously. It seemed to break loose all ties, because at once they were all talking. Dan moved up and looked down at Trinidad Burr and saw that he was dead. He felt no pity for the man and no real regret. It had been a necessary thing. The saddle bags were beside the table and he picked them up and opened them to see that the money was there. Seeing it, he closed the bags and turned to the townsmen.

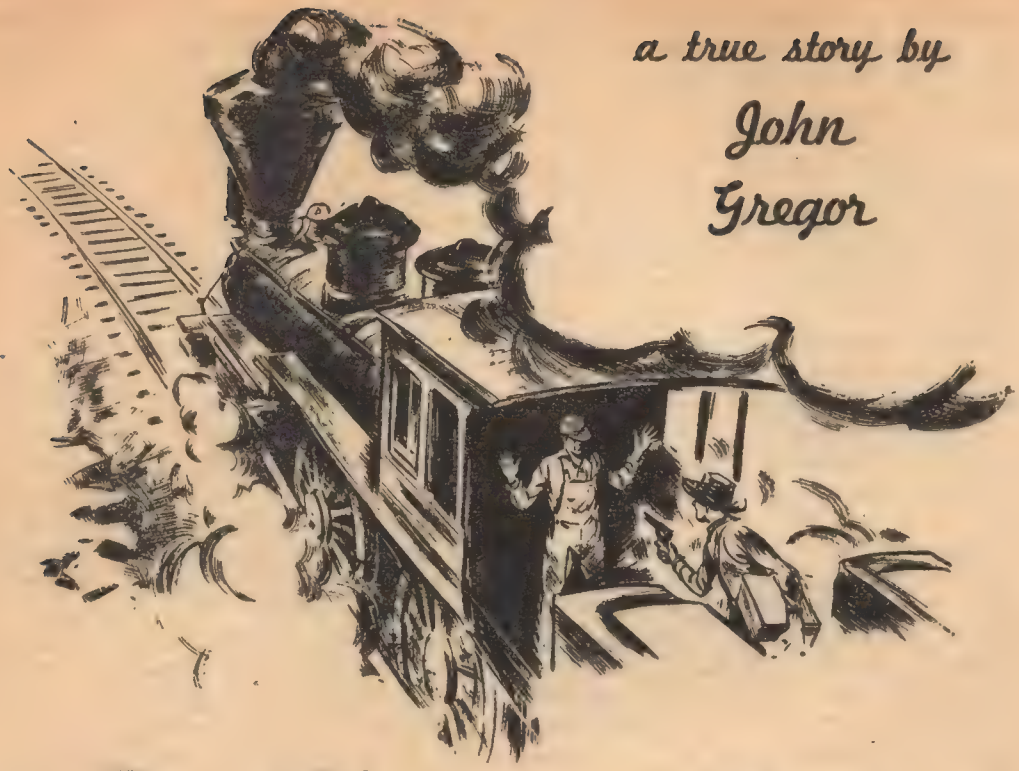
"This man robbed a bank in Roswell, New Mexico. The money's here in the saddle bags. I trailed him here and I'm taking the money back. Any objections?"

One of the men grinned, "Wouldn't make much difference if we did object, would it? Not to a man that'd trail someone that far. No, we just owe you a favor, mister."

Dan smiled then, the chill smile that never quite dissolved the coldness of his eyes, that never quite covered the loneliness.

Dan said, "He knew what he was doing; he killed a man in the bank and he wasn't going back to hang. If you'll see he's buried, you can send the bill for the burying to Roswell and the County'll pay it."

He went out then and crossed the street to the livery barn. He went through it to the corral in back and leaned on the rail, looking at the beautiful Spanish horse.



a true story by

John Gregor

The Blundering Bandit

GRANT WHEELER, a flashy saddle tramp, and scrubby Joe George, his side-kick, rode into mile-high Willcox, Arizona, on January 30, 1895. They tied their horses at the cowtown's general store and stocked up on rifle and pistol ammunition, plus dynamite, fuses, and caps.

After shopping, Wheeler and George clumped into the nearest saloon for a few quick ones. Cowpunchers seldom used dynamite, and their elbow-bending friends asked curiously about the purchases.

"Me and Joe are tired of cows," explained Wheeler. "We thought we'd mosey down around Dos Cabezas and try our luck at mining."

Wheeler and George chortled over that as they rode from town later. About five miles out, the Southern Pacific Railroad tracks crossed a bridge. They staked their horses in the mesquite out of sight of the tracks and started back to Willcox.

Hiking over desert rocks in tight, high-heeled boots pained them, but the boys were determined to make good in a new enterprise: "Wheeler & George, Train Robbers."

It was Wheeler's idea. What he liked best about cow-punching was the payday spree with hard liquor and soft women. But girls cost money and so did whisky and such doodads as his pearl-handled six-shooter. Nursing a hangover one day, Wheeler figured that $30 per month wasn't enough. There ought to be a faster way to make a buck.

Take train robbing, for instance, a business then popularized by such characters as "Black Jack" Ketchum and "Butch" Cassidy. These experts never struck a train with less than five gunmen to handle all contingencies.

But this seemed silly to Wheeler. Why cut so many in on the take? He decided one partner was enough, and chose Joe George, who had just about enough brains to lick a stamp.

Wheeler and George limped back into Willcox as a train pulled into the depot. They climbed on behind the engine and scrambled forward when it chuffed on its way again. Wheeler stuck his fancy .45 in the ribs of the engineer; George performed the same service for the fireman.

"Hi, old man," said Wheeler. "Just take it easy until we tell you to stop and nobody's going to get hurt."

He was as pleased as flies at the molasses keg. Who needed five men to take a train? This was a cinch.

Wheeler ordered the engineer to stop the train some three miles from Willcox. George escorted the fireman down from the cab and back to cut off the mail and express cars.

The express messenger dozed over a copy of the Police Gazette. Jolted awake when the train stopped, he smelled a hold-up as they rolled off again leaving the passenger cars behind. He opened the safe and rapidly cleaned out all valuables he could carry.

Not paid to argue with a six-shooter, the engineer next halted the engine by the bridge. As it slowed, the express messenger relocked the safe, dropped off, and skedaddled back down the tracks to the safer passenger cars.

Wheeler climbed into the express car. He was agreeably surprised to find the messenger absent, but George fretted about it.

"Stop worrying," said Wheeler. "Bring me the dynamite, pronto."

Sixty thousand dollars in Mexican silver pesos was sacked neatly by the safe. But that was too heavy to haul away on horseback. What the firm of Wheeler & George wanted was folding money.

They placed most of their dynamite on top of the safe and blithely weighted it down with sacks of the 'dobe dollars. The resultant explosion blew the top spang off the car. Pesos flew through the air like confetti on New Year's Eve. The silver cartwheels stuck by the gross in telegraph poles. They riddled a pile of cross-ties. Some were picked up later as far as half a mile away.

But the safe wasn't opened.

"Give me the rest of that dynamite," said Wheeler.

"Here," said George. "But what'll we do if she doesn't crack this time?"

"That's easy," said Wheeler. "I'll hold the engineer and fireman while you ride back to Wilcox and get more dynamite."

THEIR last dynamite was tamped down by the remaining sacks of 'dobe dollars. They lit the fuse, the charge exploded, and again silver soared over the landscape. The safe cracked open.

Considering that they'd just blown away $60,000, Wheeler & George didn't do so well. All they found was $1,500 in singed greenbacks. But what the hell? It would have taken them fifty months to earn that much at $30 per.

The outlaws stuffed the bills in their saddlebags, and rode off in such a hurry that they left a quirt and a pair of spurs behind. They galloped for the Chiricahua mountains where they could be sure of a popular reception. The "Cherrycows" then were quite a resort for gunhands on the dodge.

Sheriff C. S. Fly and a posse tracked Wheeler and George that far. Fly knew the reputation of the residents of that area all too well. Anyway, it wasn't his money. The posse returned to Willcox with the sad announcement that they'd lost the trail.

But the Southern Pacific did have a financial interest in Wheeler & George. The company sped Special Officer William M. Breakenridge from Tucson to Willcox. At 49, Breakenridge was a rocky-chinned, veteran lawman who'd helped tame Tombstone.

Mexican section hands, their wives and children, were enjoying a field day reaping the 'dobe dollars. Breakenridge started a couple of railroad clerks picking up the money, too. Amazingly, the railroad recovered all but about $600.

Breakenridge also found the quirt and spurs forgotten by the outlaws. He took them around the saloons, where Wheeler's explosive way with pesos was the biggest joke of the year. Cowboys identified the clues as belonging to Wheeler and George.

Wells Fargo & Company also had a financial interest in the robbery and sent Detective Johnny Thacker from San Francisco. Breakenridge met him in Tombstone and urged a quiet trip into the Chiricahuas. But the San Franciscan wasn't about to let any cow country brush-popper tell *him* how to catch outlaws.

Thacker wired his home office. He complained that Breakenridge was gumming up the case. San Francisco telegraphed Breakenridge. Let Thacker handle it, said the bosses, but help him if he wants you to.

Breakenridge said to hell with it and returned to Tucson. But he didn't forget Wheeler and George. A few days later a cowhand meandered in.

"A gal up in the Cherrycows has a picture of Wheeler," said the cowhand. "She's sore at ol' Grant. Says she gave him many a good hour when he was broke, but now he's shook her."

Breakenridge paid $20 for the picture and had dozens of copies made.

Thacker, meanwhile, was having a high-happy time in Tombstone combing the saloons for a lead on the outlaws. He worked hardest on one of Wheeler's former cow-punching pals.

The Wells Fargo gumshoe wanted the cowboy to take Wheeler and George a quart of drugged whisky, rope and haul them back to Tombstone. When that story leaked out, Thacker was laughed out of town and clear back to San Francisco.

Wheeler and George caroused through the $1,500 and awoke one morning on the verge of bankruptcy.

"What'll we do now?" asked George.

"Find us another train," said Wheeler.

They rode out of the mountains on February 26, 1895, and again held up the Southern Pacific Express. The same train and the same crew, in fact. Only this time they hit it at Stein's Pass, New Mexico, on a storm-brewing night.

"Hi, old man," said Wheeler as he rammed his .45 into the engineer's ribs. "Here we go again!"

George greeted the fireman similarly and again escorted him out of the cab to cut off the mail and express cars. The outlaws were in a hurry, as usual. What with the darkness and lack of experienced help, the mail car was detached but the big-money express car remained with the Pullmans.

Wheeler ordered the engineer to pull out. The engine rolled down the track to where they had hidden their horses and a new supply of dynamite. The shaking fireman suffered a few bad minutes when the outlaws discovered that the prized express car was missing.

"Let's shoot him and the engineer both," said George.

"No," said Wheeler. "I don't want any killing. The joke's on us, Joe."

Wheeler bowed mockingly to the sweating fireman. George jabbed his revolver back in its holster and turned away with an angry shrug. He and Wheeler jumped from the warm cab. The relieved trainmen watched them turn up jacket collars against wind-driven snow.

"Go on back to your cars," Wheeler called to the engineer. "So long, old man. See you again, I hope."

THE engineer backed off. He heard an explosion in the pine woods. Flummoxed though they were, Wheeler and George dearly loved playing with dynamite. After the blast, they lit out for the high places.

Notified immediately, Breakenridge formed a posse. They loaded their horses into a box-car and reached Stein's Pass at dawn. But the outlaw's trail was covered so thoroughly by drifting snow that even Breakenridge had to admit temporary failure. Returning to Tucson, he sent Wheeler's photograph to his contacts throughout the Southwest and patiently sat back.

Wheeler and George rode freezing through the storm. A few day later, they stopped for grub at an isolated ranch on the Blue River. Learning that Breakenridge was after them, they split up that night. George disappeared as completely as if he had ridden his horse over the rim of the Grand Canyon without a parachute.

Being on the dodge alone scraped the joy from Wheeler. No money, no girls, no jokes. Nothing but long riding, cold camps, and constant worry. Haggard and lonely, he

slinked into Durango, Colorado. Almost four hundred miles lay behind him. But in the first saloon, he saw his picture on a "WANTED" poster. Wheeler spooked out of there and rode south for the wild San Juan river country.

Telegraph keys chattered the word to Breakenridge. The grizzled man-hunter reached Durango at suppertime one evening. He took the wrinkles out of his belly at a hash-house and strolled over to the sheriff's office picking his teeth. Breakenridge asked for help and he got it—deputy sheriffs who knew the country and Navajo Indians as trackers.

They pushed Wheeler circling over the back trails, eaten by loneliness, guilt-ridden, and morose. A mood of fatalism settled over him like a pall. He couldn't shake Breakenridge ever. In that dark certainty, he jogged openly into Mancos, Colorado. Wheeler spent his last two bucks on whisky and slept in a haystack.

At daylight of April 25, 1895, Wheeler shivered awake with a pounding hangover. He saddled his horse and rode it into a small gully out of the piercing wind. Building a fire, he started boiling coffee.

As he brooded by the fire, Wheeler heard horses running his way. He scrambled to the top of the gully and saw Breakenridge and three deputies. They dropped from their mounts, fanned out, and came on with guns ready.

"Stick 'em up!" shouted Breakenridge. "You're under arrest."

"What for?" snarled Wheeler. "I haven't done anything."

A deputy fired a warning shot. Wheeler pulled his pearl-handled revolver and dove back into the cover of the gully. Bullets crackled overhead or thwacked into the bank, spattering him with dirt and gravel.

Wheeler raised his fancy sixgun. Breakenridge would never send him to rot in Yuma prison. "So long, old man," said Wheeler, and he shot himself in the head. The only outlaw who ever blew up more money than he carried away from a train robbery sprawled dead beside a dying fire.

BANDIT BREED

(Continued from page 68)

Leach let the gun fall to the ground in a mute token of surrender, and Standish scooped it up and motioned Leach ahead of him into the clearing. Mrs. Keller came slowly to her feet and walked to meet them.

At the end of a dying day, three riders paused at the residential outfringe of Indian Grove. Keena was tied into his saddle, only half-conscious; Standish had let Leach go on his promise not to come back to this country. Keena needed a doctor's care, and Standish had no inclination to let him go free, knowing that Keena would never forget.

Pausing now on the edge of town, Doris Keller said to Standish, "Where will you go?"

Standish lightly slapped the heavy bags of stolen money slung from his saddle. "I'll give these—and myself—up to the sheriff. In view of that, a jury might go easy. I'll try another start, somewhere. Maybe this time, I can do it. And you?"

"My grandfather has a farm about fifty miles north. He'll let me come there and keep house for him until I work something out."

She looked steadily at Standish now. "I'm sure the law will be lenient with you—perhaps you could come up there too. The territory is still open to homesteading, and you could start as your own boss on a place of your own."

He said hesitantly, "Would you want that?"

"Yes."

"I'll come," Standish said.

By
LUCAS TODD

TROUBLE WANTED

THERE it is," said Tyler, curtly. The town of Twin Rock lay below them, suddenly revealed by a turn in the trail. "You still with me in this?"

"That's what I came for," said Owen.

The horses picked their way down the hill and the town grew larger and larger. Maybe, thought Tyler. Maybe that's what you came for, maybe not. And maybe there's another man down there, maybe not. That's what I've got to find out— in two days.

"Are you going ahead with your idea?" asked Owen.

"Unless you've got a better one."

"No," said Owen. "I've turned it every which way while we've been riding, and I can't think of anything better."

◇ ◇ ◇

Few men want to get shot at, but Tyler desperately wanted just that . . .

"There are three thousand people down there," said Tyler. "And I've got to find a man I don't know— Fast. My idea might do it. But," he added, "there could be considerable trouble. So if you want to change your mind, do it now."

"Nope," replied Owen. "I don't ride forty miles for that. Your brother's got just two days left unless we find what we came for."

Tyler looked at Owen's face, tight and brown with a thick black moustache carved across it. You sure sound good, Tyler thought. Now let's see if you're lying. Aloud, he said, "Here we go."

They pounded across the flat and raised a few curious glances as they headed into the main street. They pulled up before a building that bore a large sign: TWIN ROCK WEEKLY GAZETTE. Largest Circulation in the Territory. They stepped down, and Tyler went into the building alone.

A man in a green eye-shade was penciling some papers behind the counter. "Afternoon," he said. "Can I help you?"

"I think maybe you can," said Tyler. "The paper comes out tomorrow morning, doesn't it?"

"Yep. Goes on sale at eight o'clock."

"Have I still got time to put in an advertisement?"

"Sure. We won't start printing for another hour."

This was why they had pushed their horses. Tyler breathed a small hidden sigh of relief. "Could I borrow your pencil?" he asked.

The printer handed over the pencil and a pad. Carefully Tyler wrote:

> To the Man Who Was at Silver Hill:
> You've got twenty-four hours. I know you're here and I've come after you.
> I'm at Clandon's Hotel.
>
> Jack Tyler

He shoved it across the counter. "How much will it cost to print that good and big?"

The printer counted the words. "Oh, say, three dollars." Tyler rang the coins on the counter, and now the printer really took in the words he had counted. "Silver Hill? That's where they jumped the stage this week, isn't it? And shot the driver?"

"Could be," said Tyler.

"We're running a big piece about it in the paper," said the printer. "You mean you got further information?"

"Not yet," said Tyler.

"Tyler," the printer said, studying the signature. "Isn't that the name of the man who —"

"No," said Tyler. "It's the name of the man who didn't. See you."

THE beginning of the trouble was mixed up in Tyler's mind with knocking and moonlight. He had been fast asleep when the knocking on the door had jarred him awake. He went out on the porch in his bare feet, and found Walter Croft, his foreman. The moon was bright and the news was bad; and since then the whole thing had been framed in Tyler's mind in cold yellow light.

"It's your brother," the gray-haired foreman had said. "He's in jail. They brought him in this afternoon."

"You're crazy," Tyler muttered. "Dan? He doesn't get in fights any more. He's a respectable —"

"Listen, Jack," said Croft, interrupting. "It wasn't just a fight. Dan's been arrested for murder."

Tyler stood there a moment, feeling stupid, knowing he looked stupid. Then his mind focussed. He said, "I'll get dressed. Wait for me."

Croft had a horse ready for him and a fresh horse for himself. They raced through the yellow night, down the gentle slopes that had been the Tyler ranch for thirty years, and then across a corner of Matt Owen's spread. While they rode, Croft gave it to him, short and not at all sweet. The stage from Twin Rock had been held up that day: a couple of cowhands had found it at Silver Hill. The driver, who had been alone without guard or passengers, was shot dead. Dan was lying there, too, unconscious, with a bul-

let in his shoulder. There was a .44 bullet in the driver and an empty chamber in Dan's .44. There was also an empty chamber in the driver's .38, and the doctor had just taken a .38 slug out of Dan's shoulder.

Tyler said coolly, "They think that Dan jumped the stage and the driver put a bullet in his shoulder before he died."

"Yes," answered Croft, "and then that Dan sort of passed out before he could grab the strong-box and get. And you see," said Croft uneasily, "the box was full of greenbacks for the bank. Your brother being the manager, was one of the few who knew it was coming. They're saying it was mighty clever for a man to rob a shipment coming to his own bank. He's the last one they'd suspect."

"Well, he didn't do it," said Tyler.

"*I* know that," said Croft. "The thing is to prove it to the others."

"Who do they think he did it? What reason would he have had?"

"They've already looked through his papers. You know that gold-mine stock he bought?"

"The Titan mine that fizzled out? He only bought a little."

"He bought forty thousand dollars' worth. He hasn't got a nickel, Jack, and he owes money all over the territory."

Tyler frowned. "He never told me a thing."

"You and me know that it was pride," said Croft. "But *they* think it was sly. You see, Jack, they're good and riled. That driver was shot in the back."

When they rapped at the door of the jail, the night deputy turned up the lamp in the office and peered out the window. He recognized them, opened at once, and led them back to the cells. Then he turned up the lamp in the corridor and left them with Dan.

Dan. Proud, pale Dan, his arm in a sling, knew at once that his brother believed him innocent, and so relaxed a little.

Tyler simply said, "What really happened, Dan?"

"Just what I told them," came the slow, stubborn voice. "I left the two cashiers to handle the money shipment that was coming, and I took the afternoon off. I went up to Silver Hill and see whether I could get me a deer. I carried a sixgun to do a little pot-shooting at rabbits along the way. Well, when I got to the hill I heard shooting near the ford. I rode around and there was the stage, stock still, and the driver on the ground. I bent over him and I could see he was dying and he mumbled something and that's all I remember. Next I knew was when someone sloshed water over me and woke me up. And I had a bullet in me."

"Did you fire a shot from your sixgun?" asked Tyler.

"Not once," said his brother.

"Did you hear what the driver said?"

"It was something about Twin Rock. 'Man from Twin Rock,' or something like that. I figure he recognized the fellow who shot him."

Tyler nodded. "And you told all this to the sheriff?"

Dan smiled acidly. "Yes, and I might just as well not have. Specially since he's gone through my ledger."

"That," said Tyler. "You might have said something to me about that."

"It's my medicine," said Dan. "Dad left me the bank and you the ranch. The bank accounts are straight as a die. But when I blew my own roll, I wasn't going to fasten on to your share."

"Still my stubborn kid brother," said Tyler. My whole family, he thought. His wife had died a year ago in childbirth, and the two last Tylers were sitting here looking at each other. "Well, take it easy, if you can. I'll see what I can do."

"Hope you can do something." The first faint note of urgency sounded in Dan's voice. "I wouldn't mind not hanging."

TYLER sent Croft back to the ranch to keep things moving, then he snatched a couple of hours' sleep in the hay at Bennett's Livery. At sun-up he was on his horse and riding out to Silver Hill. He got there while the buffalo bush

was still diamond-bright with dew. He stepped down and went over the ground carefully on both sides of the ford—as far along the trail as the edge of Matt Owen's spread—without discovering anything. He could still see signs of the things his brother had told him about. But if anything else had happened, there wasn't a trace of it left.

As he pushed the sorrel back to town, a white haze of panic began to gather in his chest. There wasn't a chance that Dan had done this thing. But there didn't seem to be much chance of proving otherwise.

Then he met Matt Owen. Outside the sheriff's office Owen came straight up and shook his hand. "Jack, I just heard. I rode into town this morning to order feed and heard about this. It's a blamed lot of nonsense. Dan couldn't have done such a thing."

Tyler let go of the outstretched hand, wondering. There was damned little love lost between his family and Matt Owen. Still the man might be talking honestly.

"I'm glad you agree with me, Matt," he said. "But we're outnumbered."

"I've known you for fifteen years," said Owen, "since you was sixteen and Dan was fourteen. We've had our differences, I guess, but the Tylers don't shoot men in the back."

No, we don't, thought Tyler, but who are you trying to convince? "That's just what I was about to tell Joe Miles."

"And you can tell him there's one man who believes it already."

"Thanks. See you later," said Tyler. He didn't understand why he was a little disturbed. Oh, maybe Owen was just being neighborly and he himself was edgy and suspicious.

Joe Miles, the sheriff, listened, soft-eyed but stone-faced. After Tyler had finished, Miles fished out a toothpick and stuck it in the corner of his mouth. "Seems to me I'm supposed to release your brother because his name is Tyler."

"No, because he couldn't have done it. You know him, Miles. You know he couldn't."

Miles rose to his feet swiftly. "I know him. I know the Tylers. They used to call your father King Tyler, and you two were the princes. You ran this stretch of the territory, you all thought. No one could scratch his head, let alone move in here, without your family approved. It made things tough for my old man, for lots of people. Well, now your brother's in money trouble and— You know he *is* in money trouble?"

"His own," said Tyler. "Not the bank's."

"All right, his own, and plenty. And he thinks he can pull a smart rob-yourself deal and if someone gets hurt, shucks, he's a Tyler, no one can touch him. Well, to me, a Tyler is just a man and this one is a murderer."

Tyler raised up on his toes a little but forced himself back. "You're going to let it go at that, are you? Not look for any other possibility?"

"What possibility? You say you've been out to Silver Hill and you couldn't find anything."

"Well, what about what the driver said before he died? About the man from Twin Rock."

Miles put the toothpick back in his vest pocket. "So your brother *says* he said. And even if he did say it, what's that to go on? You want me to put an ad in the Twin Rock Gazette and ask the guilty party to step forward?"

That was when Tyler got the idea.

"If there is a guilty party," said Miles, "which I don't believe." He sat down. "Today is Wednesday. The circuit judge will be here Friday. Your brother will stand trial, and if he's found guilty, there won't be much time wasted. That's one thing I *can* promise you."

Tyler held the sheriff's soft still eyes for a moment. Then he unclenched his fists and went back to see Dan.

Their lawyer, Ira Purvis, had already been there to tell Dan about the trial and to say he didn't think he could get a delay.

"Well, I'm riding over to Twin Rock right off," said Tyler, "to find out what I can. By the way, there's someone else

who thinks you're innocent. Matt Owen. He told me so."

"That's good," said Dan. Then he looked up sharply. "I wonder why he thinks so."

"That's just the way it went through my head," said Tyler. He rose. "Well, I'd better be moving. I'll do everything I can, Dan."

"I know," said Dan.

"See you."

"See you."

The Tylers weren't much on fond farewells.

WHEN he stepped onto the street he saw a small group of men in front of Bennett's Livery, Matt Owen in the middle of them, and saw at once that there was trouble. Owen was facing up to a big man named Loring, and Tyler remembered that Dan had once mentioned Loring's name on some business or other.

As he unhitched his horse, he heard Owen say, "Cheap talk. A lot of loose cheap talk. Dan Tyler is a neighbor of yours, his family was in these parts before any of us and—"

"Listen Mr. Owen," said big Loring, "Dan Tyler's no neighbor of mine. He made me sweat blood to pay off my note at the bank when a two-month extension would have made all the difference. Now he's murdered a man—all the facts say so—and I'll be there with a grin on my face, come hanging time."

"All right," said Owen, "if ever there's a time when the cards are stacked against *you*, I hope there's no one around to say he knows you, to stand between you and a rope."

"Why, you killer-loving punk," said Loring and slammed his ham fist against Owen's jaw. The rancher went down, then pulled himself up almost immediately on one knee, his lip cut, ready to return and mix it. But Joe Miles had come out, and he broke up the fight.

Loring and his friends moved off down the street slowly and jeeringly. Owen leaned against the door of the stable, dabbing his lip, watching them go, clearly not intending to forget it.

Tyler walked over, and Miles, who was standing next to Owen, watched him come.

"Here's a friend of yours, Tyler," said the sheriff. "I'd like to see him stay out of trouble. Maybe you can help him keep his mouth shut." He turned and followed Loring's bunch down the street.

"You all right?" Tyler asked, and Owen nodded. "I appreciate what you said," Tyler added.

"I don't want your thanks," said Owen. "I don't love the Tylers any more than anyone else. But if a man isn't judged by what he is—by his own neighbors—there ain't much use to anything. There's a half dozen ways to explain what happened at Silver Hill, but the one way I don't believe is that your brother shot a man in the back."

He's looking me right in the eye, thought Tyler. Perfect picture of a man telling the truth. He never talked this way to me before. Maybe Dan's fix brought out his real feelings, or maybe he's got other reasons.

"Well, I got some proving to do about it," said Tyler, "in a hurry." He told Owen about the driver's dying words. "Now I'm cutting out for Twin Rock."

"You don't have much to go on," said Owen.

"And I don't have much time," replied Tyler.

"You could use some help. If you'll let me, I'll ride along with you."

Another surprise. But Tyler reflected that if Owen was honest, the help might come in handy. If not, the plan he had in mind might be just the thing to help prove it. The driver had said there was a man from Twin Rock, but there might have been other men involved, too. Either way it would be better to have Owen right at hand.

"That's uncommon kind," he said.

"No," said Owen, "it's not a favor. In a way I'm doing it for myself, not you. Something I kind of believe in."

Twin Rock was the only chance, Tyler had thought, whether his uneasiness

about Owen was crazy or not. There simply was nothing else to take hold of. But ten hours after the Gazette went on sale, nothing had happened. Tyler and Owen had come down for breakfast in Clandon's Hotel, bought a copy of the paper, glanced at the story of the killing on Page One, then found the advertisement on Page Two. Two columns wide.

"Nice and big," said Tyler. "Now let's see."

He sat in the lobby all morning, waiting, with Owen across the room. Tyler could see men who in passing whispered discreetly and nodded in his direction. But no one approached him.

It was a long shot, he thought, longest ever. Here he was waiting for some unknown man to make a play, a man who might never appear. Maybe the dying driver had made a mistake and there had been no one at the holdup from Twin Rock. Meanwhile the minutes were stampeding through Dan's cell.

And something in his spine made him uneasy about the man sitting across from him. Owen, the helpful, the believing. *Why* was he helpful and believing?

Although time sped when he thought of Dan, it also crawled maddeningly because no one appeared. In the afternoon he and Owen were filling in an hour with a couple of hands of casino in the hotel saloon when a paunchy man came up to their table.

"Afternoon," he said. "One of you Jack Tyler?"

"I am," said Tyler.

The man flipped his jacket open to reveal a star pinned to his shirt. "Ed Hassler, the marshal here. I came over to ask about that ad of yours."

"It says what it says," replied Tyler.

"You know something the law don't know about this case?"

"Yep. I know my brother didn't do it."

"Sure, sure. Well, I don't want no trouble stirred up here. I just thought I'd tell you."

"Thanks. You told me."

The marshal looked uneasily from one to the other, then nodded and left.

BY SIX o'clock, when the green ring of mountains about the town was beginning to purple, no one had yet moved toward Tyler.

He threw down the cards he was holding. "I'm going out."

"Where to?" asked Owen.

"To do what I came for. I advertised that I was bait, to draw a man out. Now I'm going to *be* bait. Whoever it is I'm after, he's not coming in here. He's going to be waiting out there." He got up. "He's had time enough now to spot me."

Owen scowled. "So you're going into the street to get shot at."

Tyler shrugged. "Time's short. I've got to give this hombre a chance to rub out the one man that might know him. That's the only way I'll find him."

Unless you know him, too, Tyler thought.

"I'm coming with you," Owen said. "You're not going to do Dan any good dead."

Old Mr. Honest Eyes, thought Tyler. Well, maybe you are honest. Maybe I'm just proddy. We'll see.

He put on his hat, touched his holster, and strode through the batwings into the street. He turned left, and when he had gone about thirty yards he saw Owen come out of the hotel, pause to light a cigarette, then casually amble after him.

Three gangling youths were lounging in front of the barber shop and they looked up, almost respectfully, as he approached. "Evening, Mr. Tyler," said one. He replied, thinking that the paper had done its work well.

Across the street he saw the express office and it occurred to him that it might be good to talk to the agent. Perhaps he had seen someone hanging about or had some suspicion as to who might have been ferreting around for information about currency shipments; and the fact that there were no passengers on the trip.

The door of the office was locked and a sign hung on it saying "Closed." On the porch next door a boy was sitting,

watching him.

"Just shut this minute, Mr. Tyler," said the boy.

"Thanks, buster. You know where the agent lives?"

"Sure. He boards to Mrs. Mount's. You turn up there and it's the house with the picket fence."

Tyler had spoken to the agent once before. "His name's Kelly, isn't it?"

"No, it's a new man, came this month. Red Burford. They call him Red account of his hair."

"Obliged, buster."

He turned at the corner, Owen dangling along behind at a distance, and easily found the boarding house. He knocked, and in a minute a maid answered. No, Mr. Burford wasn't home. No, she didn't know when. She'd give him the message.

He thanked her and started away. He had the impression that an upstairs window-curtain had twitched but thought it was probably his imagination.

Tyler ate no supper. He thought of Dan and the cruel clock on the wall and just about managed to down a cup of coffee. Owen, outside of asking him why he had tried to find the express agent, said little, ate little, sat watching him. Then Owen glanced at the clock.

A little bomb exploded in Tyler. "Yes, I know," he said bitterly. "It's racing."

"I'm not shoving," said Owen evenly.

"No, you're just watching." He ground out his cigarette. "Tell me something. Silver Hill's on the edge of your spread. You never heard or saw anything of the holdup that day, not a single thing?"

"If I had, you'd have known it by now," said Owen. "Besides that ford is three miles from my house. Jack, I know you're feelin' hardpressed, but the whole reason I'm here—"

"I know, I know," said Tyler brusquely, "is because even if we've had differences, you're sure Dan is innocent and you want to help. Okay." He pushed back his chair.

"Are you going out again?" asked Owen. Tyler nodded shortly, and Owen said, "It's pitch black. Cloudy night. You're asking for trouble."

"I'm begging for it," Tyler said. "I only hope it comes quick."

He walked out on the porch and paused against the lighted doorway so that if anyone was watching they could recognize him. Then he turned right this time and, again, after he had gone about thirty yards, saw Owen slip out of the doorway into the shadows.

There were a few late stragglers and he eyed them carefully as they passd, his right hand swinging easily but not too far from his hip. His eyes tried to pierce the deeper darkness of doorways, and every time he passed an alley the flesh in his back seemed to harden.

There's no other way, he thought. If it's Owen, or if he knows the man, I have to give him a chance to make his move. If it's someone else, I have to draw him out.

The only sound now, as he strolled out of the center of town, was that of his boots and, faint behind him, Owen following. The man who might be the one he was trying to unmask—following him into the dark. But he had to go on, had to give whoever it was the opportunity to strike. He passed a lighted doorway and swung up a side street, his steps breaking the quiet night as if he were crunching the first frost.

THEN a cry, a short sharp cry, lanced the blackness.

He ran back around the corner and heard a sound that could mean only one thing. A body falling.

He ran back, and almost tripped over a sprawling form. There was just a faint spill of light from the doorway down the street. He could see that the fallen man was Owen. He was on his face, a knife protruding from the back of his shoulder.

Quickly Tyler pulled it out, ripped the shirt wider and made a pad of his kerchief which he shoved under the shirt against the wound. "Matt," he said, lifting the man up and leaning him against the wall. "Matt. Is it bad?"

Owen was breathing heavily, but he

managed a smile. "No. Surprise, more than anything. I'll be all right in a minute. Didn't hear anyone, he must have thrown it."

And I suspected you, thought Tyler. Here you almost get yourself killed trying to help me, and I suspected you.

"It caught you high," Tyler said. "It's not too bad. So if you'll be okay for a while—" He got to his feet abruptly

"Where you going?" asked Owen sharply.

"He got you instead of me," said Tyler, "but it was the man I'm looking for." I've got a double reason for getting him now, Tyler thought. Dan and you. A kind of apology to you. "You'll be all right, Matt."

"Jack, wait—"

"I'll watch my step," said Tyler, "but I've got to move." I owe it to two men now.

Owen called out softly to him again but Tyler was on his way, quietly but quickly, into the dark. He figured from the angle of the knife that it had been thrown from across the street and, sure enough, just opposite he found a narrow alley. As he entered it, keeping to one side, the clouds broke. A sliver of moonlight came through, but in a curious way the light only revealed emptiness and made it seem darker than before. He kept his left hand on the wall and when he came to a corner, he hesitated, took a chance and stepped on.

He was wrong. He felt a jab in the small of his back and a mouth just behind his ear whispered, "Shut up. And reach."

Tyler stiffened, with a surge of fear and satisfaction. At last. No matter what happened, at least he had found him.

The voice whispered, "Go on, reach. I don't have another knife, and I'd rather not shoot here. But I will if you want it."

Tyler put his hands up. The man said, "Now just keep walking. Nice and easy, and where I tell you."

They went down the alley, past a few straggling houses, then down a path that

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led across a field. Tyler still had not seen the man but he heard the steps behind him and when he slowed down to feel his way, the pistol met his back. They got to a fork in the path and the man said, "Go left."

The left trail led towards a wood. Tyler knew, too clearly, what was happening. The man thought he had killed Owen, silently. Now he was taking Tyler out here where a shot would not be heard.

An old cabin appeared among the trees. "Hold it," said the man. He reached around and opened the door, then with one hand got a match from his pocket and scratched it on his seat. He touched a lamp that stood on a rickety table just inside.

"Get in," he said.

Tyler entered and the man shut the door behind him. Now Tyler saw him, a tall thin man, wearing town clothes and a string tie and a narrow-brimmed hat. The man smiled and with his free hand, pushed his hat back. His hair was bright red.

This, Tyler knew, was the man the dying driver had recognized. The new agent from Twin Rock.

"Well," said the man, "this is cozy. All neat and tidy."

Tyler said, "All right, Burford. What next?"

The man squinted, then said, "Oh, I guess someone told you about my hair. Well, here's what's next. Your pal Owen is through and now you're through, mister. They're going to find you in a gully outside town, in a week or so. If they're lucky." He raised his gun.

Suddenly Tyler felt calm and free. It was as if he realized that nothing in his life could ever be worse than this moment. Even if he lived only two seconds more, they would be better, and that clarity made him strong.

"You want it coming or going?" asked Burford. "Front or back?"

Tyler hesitated. "I'd just as soon not see."

"Turn around."

He started to turn slowly, then—with absolutely nothing to lose—spun right on around till he faced Burford again, drawing his gun and snapping out a shot. It nicked Burford in the leg but he fired back quickly and knocked the gun out of Tyler's hand.

Burford grinned in pain and slow hate. "All right. You've had your fun. Now I'll have mine. I was going to make it quick. But now I'm going to gut-shoot you." In freezing silence Tyler saw him pull back the hammer of his Colt.

A SHOT rocked the little room. He was sure it was Burford's gun and couldn't understand why he felt nothing. But Burford coughed once, the gun fell from his hand, and he fell forward heavily with a gushing hole in his neck. Then Tyler saw Owen at the window.

Owen came in, pale and a little unsteady, with his sixgun still in his hand. Calmly he said to the silently dying man, "Goodbye, mister."

"Almost *my* goodbye," said Tyler. "By a gnat's whisker." This was the man he had suspected—who first had got himself knifed trying to help, and then had saved him from a bullet in the stomach. Shame and gratitude welled up in Tyler and he had to try twice before he could speak.

"Matt," he said, "there's a lot I want to say. Right now it's just — thanks. Thanks, Matt."

Owen shrugged. "Pity I had to get off the shot so fast. I should have winged him. Not much use as a witness." He prodded Burford's body with his boot. "Dead."

Tyler nodded wearily. "There's our man, and he's no good to us. We can't prove a thing." Bitterly he continued: "Thirty seconds ago I thought he was going to kill me and now I'm sorry he's dead. The one man who could have talked —" He broke off. An echo smote his brain like a sledge. "Funny thing."

"What?"

"He knew your name. He's new around here but he knew your name."

"Did he?" said Owen. Then his voice

sounded flat, different. "Did he?"

And a great blast of cold wind seemed to roar over Tyler, chilling spine but tearing away a cloud. Every nerve in his body seemed suddenly to quiver; as if lightning had slashed through his body.

"Another funny thing," he said slowly. "How'd you know to come here? You were too weak to follow right off, and it was too dark to see any sign. How'd you know to come here?"

Owen just looked at him; nothing changed in his face. The blue eyes simply bore down on Tyler.

Jack Tyler's gun lay on the floor where Burford's bullet had knocked it. His eye flicked toward it.

Owen leveled his pistol and said quietly, "Don't."

Tyler faced him, everything in him feeling tight and final. A smile forced its way out. "You *were* in on it. It was you and Burford."

Owen's mouth hardly moved as the granite face replied, "Yes, smart man. Me and Burford."

"I was itchy about you the whole time. And I was right."

"You sure were," the flat voice continued. "I'm going to tell you about it, for a goodbye present. Red was my cousin, and when he came on the express job, he put the proposition to me. We talked it over here, in this cabin. I thought it was fine, and when your brother happened along that day, it was even better. We slugged him and framed it to look as if he did it, carefully covering our sign. I thought that was a real extra dividend. Nice, too, to get him hung instead of shooting him."

"But before you could crack the strong box, the other riders came."

"Yes," said Owen. "So there was no money for us. Still it wasn't all a loss. Your brother's going to swing. And I rode along with you to watch you sweat, another dividend. And to make sure Burford kept shut if you found him. Of course," he continued wryly, "when you went to his house today, he thought I'd

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tipped you off. That's why he threw the knife."

"And that's why you closed his mouth just now." Owen said nothing; Tyler continued. "All right, that's the way it was. But why? You're going to squeeze that trigger in a minute but you could at least first tell me why. You've got a ranch. You're making out. Why did you want to—"

"Making out." Owen almost spat the words. "Do you know the spread I *could* have had if your father hadn't hoorawed me off the government graze and taken it for himself? If he hadn't refused to let me water my stock on any of his streams? Do you think I'd be having to buy winter feed that keeps me penniless? Do you think I'd be a two-bit tinhorn scratch cow farmer if it weren't for him?"

Owen's eyes hooded. "All you Tylers. Everybody hates you. You got to this territory first, and so you're the kings. It's a free country, but no one dast step in here without your family say so. You were here first, and that settles everything, no matter what the law says."

"You're talking about law?" asked Tyler sardonically.

"Not any more," said Owen. "Everybody hated your family, but nobody would do anything, except me. When Burford told me the set-up, I knew if we could get that money it would ruin your brother. Either the bank or personal or both. And then you'd sell off bits of your spread—slow—to help him out. And nice and slow I could buy. Well, all right, that's blown up. But Dan's finished. And they're going to find you and Burford about a week from now, and they'll think—"

A branch cracked outside the window.

Owen wheeled sharply, instinctively, and before he had a chance to recover from his instinctive movement, Tyler leaped. He grabbed Owen's right wrist with both his hands and twisted fiercely. With a cry Owen released the Colt, then brought up his knee savagely. Tyler stepped back and flat-handed the other

[Turn page]

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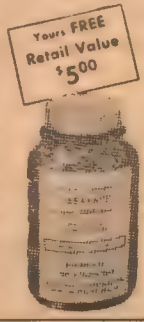

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man in the face, up against the wall. Owen swung his fists as hard as he could but Tyler seemed to feel nothing, he just bore on in.

With his left hand he grabbed Owen's shirt and pinned him to the wall, then he drove his right fist three times, hard, into Owen's face. The man fell limply, heavily, and it was over.

Paunchy Ed Hassler walked in the door. "I slipped," he said. "The grass is wet, and I slipped on a branch."

Tyler panted hard. "Good thing you did. Lucky for me, marshal." He looked at Owen lying there. Strange, but somehow he couldn't feel just hate alone. No matter what the man had done and wanted to do; there was something more than hate. Tyler couldn't quite understand.

"I was prowling around tonight," said Hassler, "because you were in town. Found a knife in Main Street. And a

big bloodstain. So I got me a lantern and follered the footprints. Fetched up here in time to hear his little speech. You got a witness, Tyler."

Hassler shut his office door and turned back to Tyler, seated by the desk. "That's the fastest rider I know. He'll be handing my letter to Joe Miles inside four hours. Your brother'll be okay."

"I'm obliged, Marshal," said Tyler.

"We'll take friend Owen over tomorrow. Now you go back to the hotel and get some shut-eye. A few hours in the sack and you'll be the same man you were."

Tyler got to his feet slowly, bone-tired. He thought of Owen: thief and murderer and cold conniver at an innocent man's hanging; but he remembered something else, too.

"Maybe, Marshal," he said. "And maybe I'll be a mite changed. A man learns things as he goes along."

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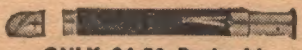

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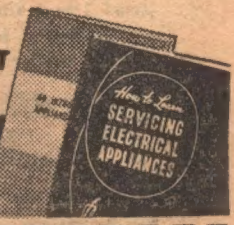

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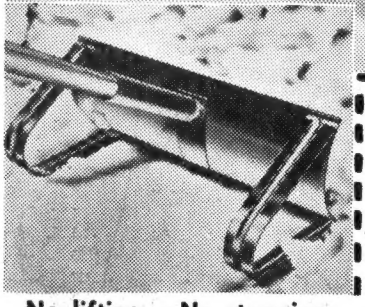

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